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MARCH 1989
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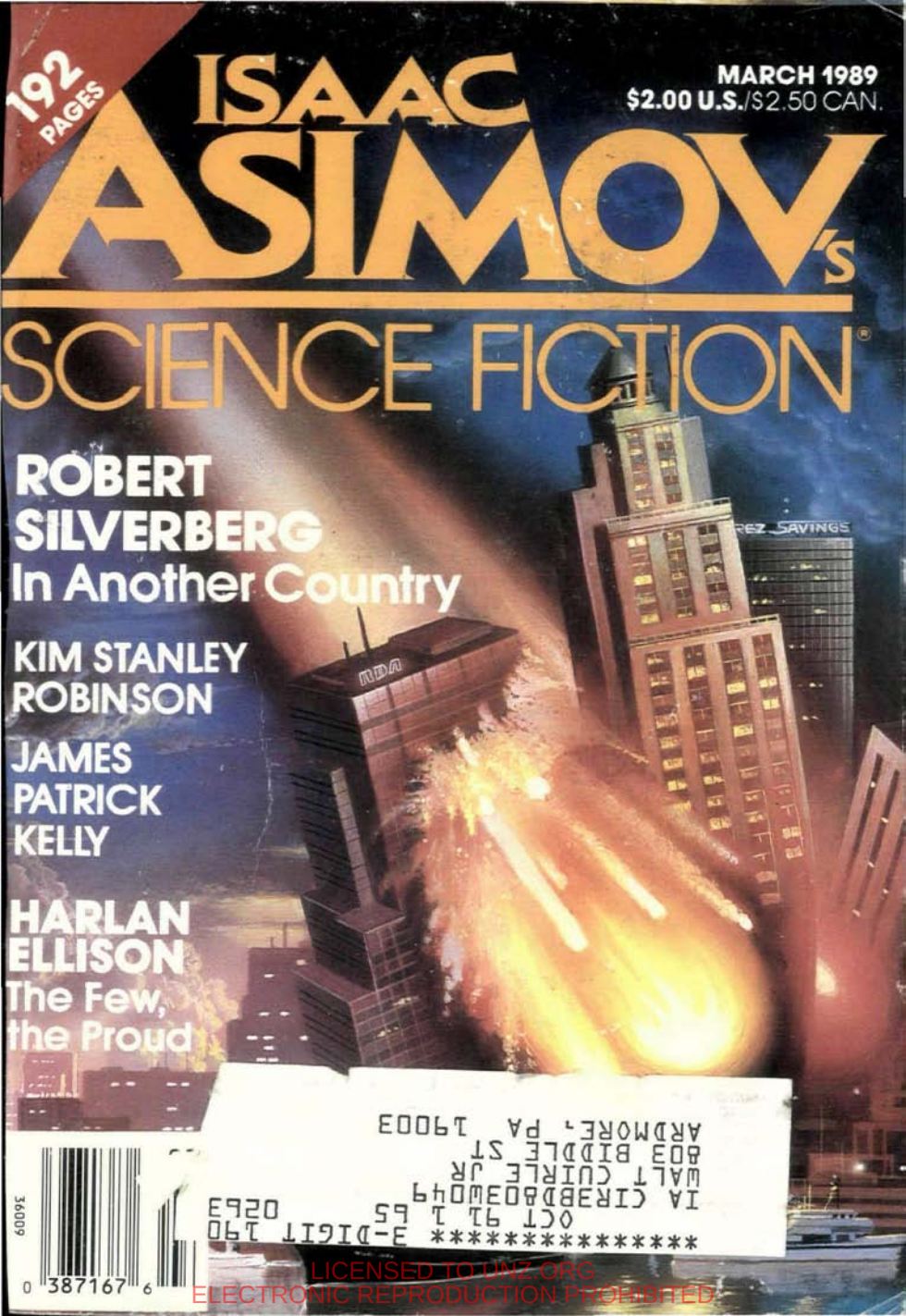

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EDITORIAL

WORDS

by Isaac Asimov

The veteran SF writer, Alan E. Nourse, sent me a news clipping the other day. It was from his home town paper in Washington State and the headline reads "Library Board Rejects Request."

The first paragraph reads: "The Ellensburg Public Library Board of Trustees last night voted to allow the tape cassette version of Isaac Asimov's book *Robots of Dawn* to remain in the general collection despite the complaint of a patron who said the book contains sexual material inappropriate for children."

The news item quotes the complainant as saying: "It seems like the book was written as an excuse to use (certain) words."

To be sure, I didn't write *The Robots of Dawn* for children, but never mind that. What I would like to know is what words the complainant is referring to? The article doesn't say, which is a shame because I am terribly curious about the point. After all, I happen to know that in the entire book there is not one vulgarism (nor is there in any other work of fiction I have written) so what in the world can she be complaining about?

In any case, the Board of Trustees, as the headline says, rejected the request. One trustee said, "I just can't censor it as pornography. I don't find it in there." Another trustee said, "I have to side with Jerry. I can't call this pornography and censor it."

So there you are—although something naughty inside me wishes they *had* declared it pornography and made a big federal case out of it. It would have boosted the sales of the book by at least a hundred thousand.

But the news item got me to thinking. I don't use vulgarisms in my writing, as I've said, but why not?

For one thing, I have a writer's respect for the English language and a vast admiration for its enormous vocabulary. I believe firmly that there is nothing I can possibly wish to say, however forceful, insulting, or denigrating, that can't be expressed in the conventional words of the language. And I have enough command of the language to do so. The characters who inhabit my writings are, in almost every case, at my own level of education and culture, and they, too,

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feel no need to move outside the conventional bounds of the language. I think that's an adequate reason.

This doesn't mean, though, that I disapprove of those writers who make use of vulgarisms to lend color or force to their views, or who feel it necessary to report conversation realistically, when dealing with characters whose lack of education or culture makes it impossible for them to express themselves except through vulgarisms.

That's all right with me. Other writers can do it their way, and I will do it mine.

I do get a little annoyed, of course, when I am accused (as I sometimes am) of avoiding vulgarisms out of prissiness or out of some deep-seated sexual dysfunction. If I merely said, heatedly, "I know all the vulgarisms and can use them if I wish to, but I just don't choose to," that would only create laughter and would be used as a further piece of evidence against me.

Fortunately, I can refer to my five books of limericks (published under my own name), which contain 588 choice limericks I composed myself, some of which might make even Norman Spinrad blush.

But let me go on. It isn't a matter of vulgarisms only. There's not a word in the English language, I do believe, that some people wouldn't find either suggestive or offensive or both. The word "boy" has been so viciously used to infantilize blacks, that now one hesitates to use it properly and there is a tend-

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ency to say to a five year old, "How are you, my man?" (Of course, you could say, "my little man," but I would find that a lot more offensive than "my boy" if I were five.)

For the same reason, it is now difficult to use the word "girl" (unless you are addressing a woman of over forty, who would find it flattering), or "gay."

Naturally, I am under the impression that I know which conventional and respectable words now have risky connotations, and I was flabbergasted when I found I had used one I never dreamed would be offensive.

In my May, 1988 editorial, I referred to a critic who had (as critics will) said something stupid, and I therefore characterized him, in a pleasant and gentle way, as a "retarded pipsqueak."

Now, according to the *Oxford English Dictionary Supplement*, "retarded" is a psychological term "originally applied to children whose mental or educational progress lags behind that of their contemporaries to a significant degree; later extended to anyone with a measured intelligence less than some value that is itself below the average." What's more, "pipsqueak" is defined as "a contemptuous name for an insignificant person." My characterization, therefore, of the critic in question as a "retarded pipsqueak" would seem to me to be luminously and impressively correct.

Yet I received a letter from a reader who said that she had settled down, with great joy, to read the magazine, and then almost at once came across my "retarded pipsqueak" remark, at which, she said, "my day was ruined."

Apparently, she had worked for four years in a training center for the retarded and she says, "I get a little hot when I see or hear the word 'retarded' thrown around haphazardly." She then goes on to say, "I think you owe a large portion of our population an apology."

Well, I won't argue with her over whether it is a fact that a large portion of our population is retarded in the psychological sense. Presumably, she's the expert.

However, I don't see the need to apologize. I was not using the word in her narrow psychological sense, but in the extended sense to which the *O. E. D.* has given its blessing. I used it as a rather mild synonym for "stupid," and I think I was perfectly right in doing so. I would have written the young lady a personal letter and explained this, but she carelessly neglected to include a return address, so I'm forced to write an editorial on the subject instead.

Now, without really changing the subject, let me digress. There is an English word "dumb" that means "being unwilling or unable to speak." In the common phrase, "dumb animals," we are referring to creatures who, unlike human beings, cannot speak and communicate in words.

Naturally, in any society that values a ready speaker who can

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REPORT

Our first glimpse of Lewis Shiner's vision for DESERTED CITIES OF THE HEART came in a hotel room in Tucson, Arizona, during the World Fantasy Convention. We sat there while he told us about this novel he was working on. It had a little bit to do with contemporary Mexican politics. It had a little bit to do with Mayan culture and the legend of Kulkulkan. It had a little bit to do with this guy who had a serious longing for his brother's wife. And it had a little bit to do with Ilya Prigogine's theories, if you can believe it. And the writing found inspiration from novelists like Robert Stone. We sat there, listening intently, but quietly wondering to ourselves, "How is he going to bring this impossible story together?"

Funny thing is that he actually managed to do so. In fact, he managed to do so brilliantly. He did so to the point where the reviewer for the *Washington Post Book World* called it "the best book I've read in the sf and fantasy field this year," the *San Francisco Chronicle* called it "both a taut political thriller and a transcendental apocalyptic fantasy" and novelist James Ellroy (whose most recent novel, **The Black Dahlia** just hit the *New York Times* Bestseller List—congratulations, Mr. Ellroy) called it "savagely written" and "a total original."

We never doubted for a second that Lew could pull it off, mind you, but we were still stunned when we read it. He accomplished everything he set out to accomplish. Lew lives in Austin and we live in New York, but we're thinking of inviting him to join us in a hotel room in Tucson in the near future. Just so he can tell us some more impossible stories.

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LEWIS SHINER
DESERTED CITIES OF THE HEART

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easily express himself in reasoned and interesting fashion (as you and I can), anyone who is too embarrassed to speak, or too suffused with a feeling of strong emotion, or unable to decide on the correct words, is going to seem unintelligent.

"Dumb" has therefore come to mean "stupid" and is very commonly used in that sense. You can imagine how unfair this is to people who cannot speak out of some physiological shortcoming and who are not the least bit stupid.

It was common to speak of those unfortunates who were born deaf, and who, therefore, could not learn to make sounds, as "deaf and dumb," but the gathering connotation of "dumb" as "stupid" has made that phrase so unfairly insulting that the expression "deaf-mute" is used instead. So far, at least, the word "mute" means only "silent" and has no unpleasant side-significance.

My correspondent who was so offended by my use of the term "retarded," went on, as part of her criticism of me for what I did, to say in her letter, "There's no harm in being retarded, but there is in being dumb—and that's dumb."

I couldn't help but notice that her misuse of the word "dumb" for "stupid" was far more flagrant than my supposed misuse of the word "retarded." Perhaps if she had worked for four years with deaf-mutes she would have been more sensitive to the true meaning of "dumb" and would have avoided her error.

So now let me get to the point.

Words are only symbols, but symbols can do harm. If one refers to an adult black as a "boy," one uses the word as a way of implying racial inferiority and it is very rightfully resented and should not be used so by a decent individual.

Again, if the use of what I call "vulgarisms" is unnecessary and would tend to embarrass those who are reading you or listening to you, then you should ask yourself very seriously whether such language is worth using and whether less potentially offensive terms may be substituted without harm.

Let us, however, not go to extremes and labor to find offense, and fly into high dudgeon, over minor matters of usage. For one thing, it's silly and needlessly consumes emotional energy, and, much more important, it tends to trivialize the battle against the truly damaging aspects of language misuse. ●

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LETTERS

Dear Dr. Asimov:

The cover of the March issue of *IAsfm* featured two female authors (Jane Yolen and Nancy Kress). Inside I found yet another (Melanie Tem), leading me to the pleasant realization that SF isn't nearly the male-dominated field it once was (sorry, I'm a bit slow on the uptake, sometimes). This put me in mind of the late Dr. Rainbow's Viewpoint column on Love-Potions (April 1985).

Dr. Rainbow pointed out that in order to increase SF readership, one ought to be able to create a love potion which would cause even the most popular girl in high school to "beg and plead with the average pimple-faced wanker to escort her to the junior prom. Afterwards, she would promptly bear his sixteen wanker-dominant Sci-Fi reading children."

If female SF authors are now capturing a large portion of the market, it follows that there are probably a greater number of female SF readers out there, too! Now, why is this?

I suspect that you are responsible. Could it be that back when you were dabbling in biochemistry you fortuitously came across just such a love-potion? If you had, understanding the need for more readers to buy your stories, you undoubtedly would have tested the formula on, say, a Worldcon. Couples who previously had not dreamed of fulfilling their baser desires suddenly became parents. Science-Fiction-reading parents. Parents who would nurture a mature and balanced appreciation for the genre, instead of viewing it as an escape only suited to pimple-faced wankers.

Now we are reaping the rewards of your far-sightedness. Science Fiction is more popular than ever before, and more widely read. Even a few popular high school cheerleaders are now known to read SF regularly. Of course, all this could simply be a happy coincidence.

Half-bakedly,

Steve Smythe
Calgary, Alberta
Canada

Alas, I have never had a love potion, either of my own making or anyone else's. The nearest thing I have to one is brains, wit and charm, but that sort of thing fills with erotic desire not more than twelve or thirteen girls in the whole wide world. (But then twelve or thirteen is enough for one man, don't you think?)

—Isaac Asimov

Dear Dr. A., Mr. D., or Ms. W.:

Except for a rejected short story, I've never written you, but the May

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issue poses a problem I wish you would solve for me. Why is it that the Jane Yolen piece, written in eight-line stanzas with a rhyme scheme of abcbdbee and in a basic trochaic quadrimeter, with some dactyls for variation, is listed as a short story, whereas Bruce Boston's work, in six-line stanzas. with a "floating foot" (William Carlos Williams' term) and no rhyme scheme, is listed as a poem? Are you saying that if it rhymes, it's a short story? What are you saying? Quizzically,

Bill Collins
Davis, CA

The way I look at it, a poem can express an emotion or sketch out a description and then it is a poem. On the other hand, something that happens to scan and rhyme can also tell a story and then it is a short story in verse, and you might want to call it simply a short story. Frankly, I think Coleridge's "Rime of the Ancient Mariner" is one of the most gripping short stories ever written.

—Isaac Asimov

Dear Mr. Dozois:

I believe Norman Spinrad may have failed to grasp why J. G. Ballard hasn't set off many firecrackers in this country. I'm embarrassed to say that I've read several of Ballard's stories and, while I have even enjoyed a few of them, I've mostly found him to be a dull fellow treading worn paths powered by his own exhausts. Can I really expect civilized company from a man who would write a story entitled "Why I Want to Fuck Ronald Reagan"? What might motivate me to pursue stupid adolescent contempt off to such a dull start? Is there any doubt that in Ballard's mind Joe McCarthy is Nixon is Reagan is more or less every Republican and most Democrats?

What I remember most about Ballard is his titles. (I'm confident that on balance I do his oeuvre a service by being thus forgetful.) Years ago I bought several paperback collections of his stories on the strength of his reputation and his titles alone, but he is one little light that failed me long ago. (Incidentally, they were mere stories in those days. When did the Mad Avenue of his soul come up with the fraud of "condensed novels" to sucker the naïve and decorate his output with a little cheap literary mumbo jumbo?)

Ballard is no writer. He's a professor of pus and a senator of sores. He lives a masquerade. The problem with the vomitus of such charlatans is not that it's disgusting — which would fulfill one of their prime aspirations—but that it's boring.

Ballard an elitist? Yeah, sure. We yahoos are just too dim to appreciate his timeless subtleties. Thank God for "Mr. Ed" reruns and God bless Amurrica.
Sincerely,

Theodore E. Reed
Garden Grove, CA

As someone on "Information Please" once said, "One man's Mede is another man's Persian." The most important thing to remember about opinions concerning such complex things as literary excellence is that those opinions are very subjective.

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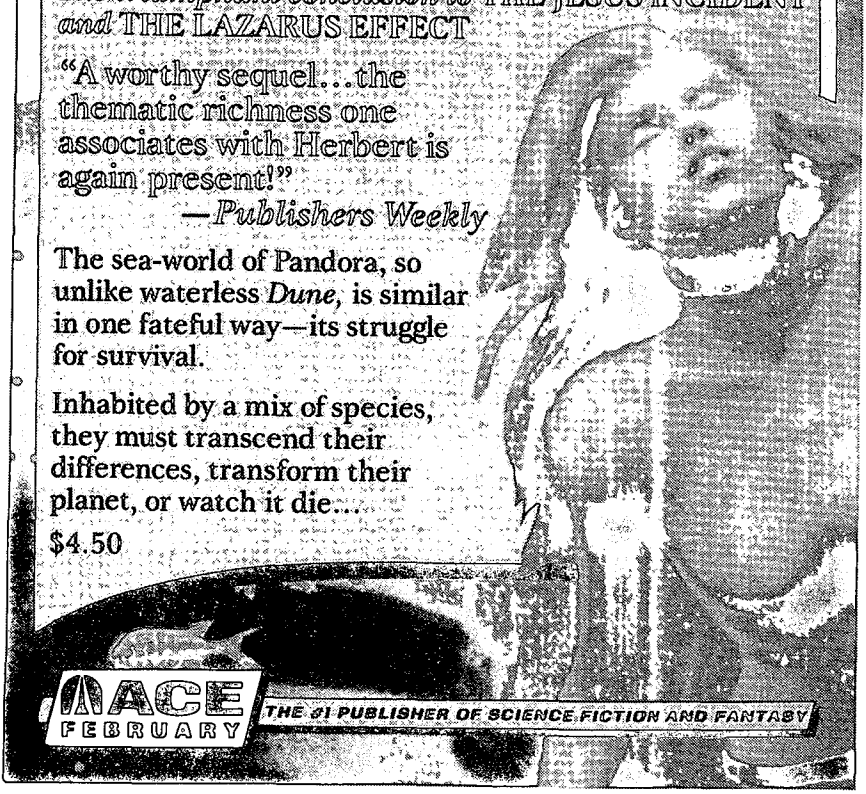

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Shaw, for instance, didn't think much of Shakespeare.

—Isaac Asimov

Dear Dr. Asimov:

In reference to Janet Lee-Bock's letter in the May 1988 *IAsfm:* Ms. Lee-Bock says, "After wading through two critiques of critiques I find myself coming to the conclusion that your Letters section is being used as some sort of pen-pal for would-be writers."

First, you and Mr. Dozois are two fair and open-minded individuals; the proof lies in the fact that you allowed that letter into your letters column. You are far more open-minded than Ms. Lee-Bock would seem to be.

Your Letters feature is nothing short of interesting. It is also fun and, at times, irritating. It is never boring. This is my opinion, of course; call it a vote in favor of keeping the feature.

But, besides my personal preference, the Letters column also serves a purpose. Correct me if I'm wrong, but doesn't the feature provide Mr. Dozois and his staff with a barometer for noting changes in reader interest? Hasn't it been used to urge the management to make certain format changes? Can we really say this feature is useless?

Also, consider this: without a Letters feature there would not have been: a. the letter from Ben Bova (February 1988), b. the letter from Ursula K. Le Guin (March 1988), and c. the frequent letters from Robert Silverberg. And on and on. My point is: are we to consider these among the members in good standing of the "pen pal club for would-be writers"? If so, would Ms. Lee-Bock kindly send me information on how I could join?

Finally, I think the letter was unfair and terribly misrepresented. After reading two letters Ms. Lee-Bock asks you to dump the entire feature? That's worse than condemning a "would-be writer" because his first two stories were a little less than perfect. Thankfully, Mr. Dozois and his staff are more open-minded.

Finally, your Letters feature serves another, very important purpose. It gave me a healthy chance to blow off some steam.

For that, I thank you.

Ross McPhail
Quincy, IL

You know, people sometimes get angry and before they have a chance to cool down, they sit down and write letters they don't really mean. I do it, too, but usually (not always) I tear up the letter after I have written it and try again when I've cooled off. I think Ms. Lee-Bock's letter may have been one of those moment-of-rage things.

—Isaac Asimov

Dear Dr. Asimov:

In the Letters Department of the April 1988 *Isaac Asimov's Science Fiction Magazine,* you mention Shakespeare's line about killing all the lawyers. I see and hear this quoted a lot (not by *my* clients) and I think it is time to start putting this quote into context.

The line as you correctly state, is from *Henry VI,* Part II, and it is found in Act IV, Scene 2 of that play. The line is spoken by Dick the

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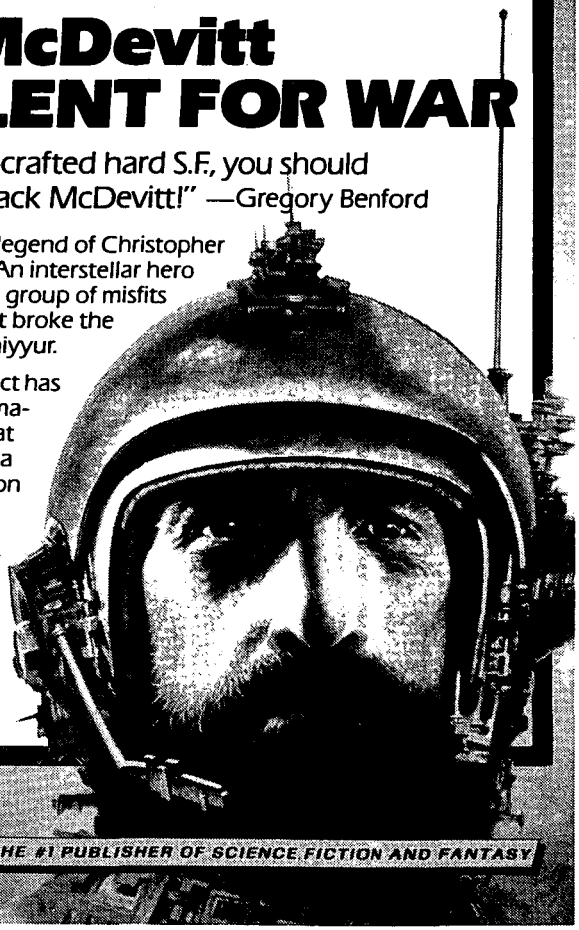

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Butcher, who is part of a gang led by Jack Cade who are plotting to take over the country. Their platform, as stated by Jack Cade, is to have cheap beer and bread. All of the realm will be held in common, and it will be a crime to drink a small beer. Dick the Butcher also suggests "first thing we do, let's kill all the lawyers."

I think a fair interpretation of this suggestion is not for revenge on lawyers, but because the lawyers would be instrumental in preventing the take-over of the country. Although from the modern version of the play, this might be arguable, in an earlier version of this play, the butcher's proposition was to "destroy first the great lords of the realm and after the judges and lawyers."

Science fiction writers would doubtless have been included, if any had existed at the time.

If the butcher had said "let's kill most of the lawyers," I could have gone with his whole platform.

Robert Ross
Solvang, CA

Let's face it. Lawyers get a bad press even though every individual lawyer I know is a sweet and decent fellow. But it could be worse. Politicians are further down the list and all the way down—all *the way down*—*are critics. I don't think Shakespeare ever took out after critics. What a pity!*

—*Isaac Asimov*

Dear Dr. Asimov,

Someone once told me that literature was food for the mind. If this is true, short stories must be sandwiches. Not the fast food franchised kind, but large, delicious, carefully prepared sandwiches — filling and complete. Just grab one and start munching; large enough to satisfy one's hunger but small enough to be consumed in a short span.

Unfortunately, I usually can't find the time for a full course novel, although I do wade through a salad bar of news magazines every week. But oh, those sandwiches. *IAsfm* is my deli of the mind, full of tasty house specials with crisp chips in the Editorial column and usually more than one sour dill in the Letters department.

Now, what'll I have . . . maybe one of Shepard's south of the border extravaganzas with extra hot sauce. . . . No . . . no . . . have Silverberg whip us up one of those Sumerian numbers on rye with hot mustard. Better yet, I'll have 'em both! . . . to go, please.

Eclectic, economic, economical, edgy—excuse me. I just spilled adjectives all over the place. Now where's that napkin . . .

Steve Beville
Spartanburg, SC

I must admit that I like food metaphors, especially now when my dear wife Janet is determined that I maintain my slim figure (well, almost slim) indefinitely on the specious excuse that she wants to keep me alive.

—*Isaac Asimov*

Dear Dr. Asimov and Mr. Dozois:

I have been reading your magazine off and on since 1983 (I say

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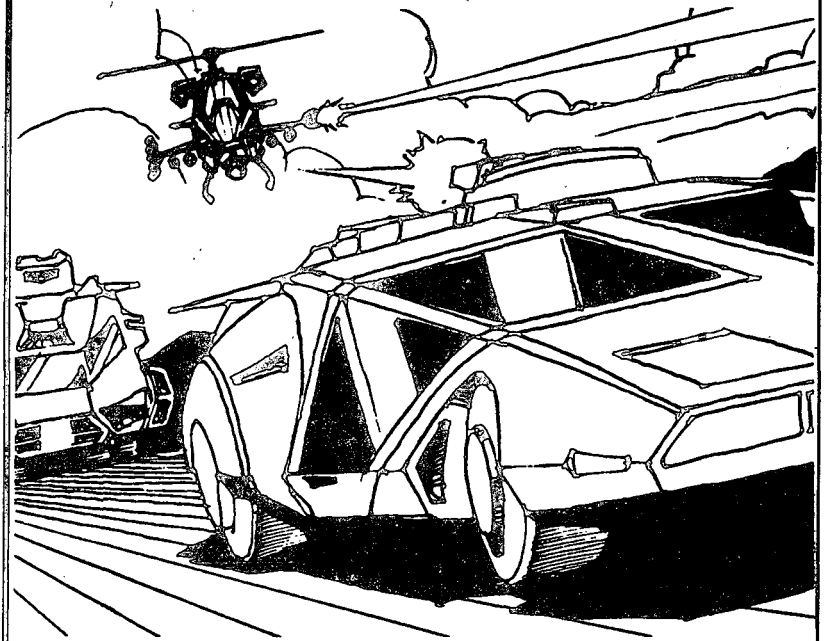

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off and on because, besides the issues I've lost, at one point my mother decided you weren't worth the cost and discontinued my subscription. Needless to say, after almost a year I couldn't stand it anymore and renewed—in my own name.). Anyway, I must say that I have come to admire the readers and contributors equally as much. I regard *IAsfm* as a "newsletter" of sorts, and love to see what's going on with everyone. At one point I was embarrassed to say that I read science fiction, but now I feel as if I'm part of an elite club who has the *privilege* of reading it. This brings me to my first point: I'm missing about one-fifth of my issues for assorted reasons, and am curious to know if I can get the back issues anywhere (from you?). Lately I've been going to the library and digging for the lost ones, but I'd really like my own copies, you know? This brings me to my second point—the reason I actually got around to writing this.

When I was in elementary school (I'm now in college), I read an excellent series of books about some kids from Wales battling the Forces of Dark or something like that. For some reason I remembered it about a month ago, and tried to find out where it was (a considerable task since I didn't know any titles or the author's name). Anyway, so here I was, reading the August '87 issue that I'd borrowed from the library, and—you guessed it—there it was in the "On Books" section; something about repackaging or something. Naturally, I'm now a VERY happy camper, because I can find this series again! Yipee-skipee, as they say.

This little episode also gave me a legitimate reason to write to you all, and since I'm here, I might as well say a lettle bit more.

First of all, while I certainly don't like every story or article you print, I do believe that there are a few which are worth more than the subscription price by themselves: John Varley's "PRESS ENTER ■," "Realtime," by Daniel Keys Moran and Gladys Prebehalla, "A Gift from the GrayLanders," by Michael Bishop, and "Portraits of His Children," by George R.R. Martin, among others. Also everything by Kim Stanley Robinson and almost everything by Lucius Shepard. (If either of you would like to get married, please let me know—I can't hold out forever.)

I'm sure that you also realize an obvious benefit from publishing these stories: I go and buy more of the author's works. I'm starting quite the collection on Robinson, and my friends are asking who he is that I should admire him so much.

Pam Thomas
Vancouver, WA

Well, we try hard, Pam. And you're a sweet and virtuous girl to offer marriage to science fiction writers who please you. The most I ever got offered was a kiss—but I always accepted.

—Isaac Asimov

Readers interested in purchasing back issues of IAsfm *should turn to our special ad on page 86. We don't have all of our back issues available, but we hope you'll find an offer for the ones you're missing there.*

—Sheila Williams

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GAMING

by Matthew J. Costello

In August 1988, the two large national game conventions, Origins and Gen-Con, joined forces for, as Ed Sullivan used to opine, a really big show.

And I should have been enthusiastic. The game cons were events that I never missed. But as the date drew near for the con, held in Milwaukee in the great Mecca Auditorium, I found myself not particularly excited. I attributed it to my jaded sensibilities—after all, I had more games in my attic than can be found in most game stores.

When I mentioned this to someone recently, my lack of interest and my over-stuffed attic, they said that it certainly must be hard to stay on top of so many new releases, especially with my novels, articles, and, oh yes, my family, all making demands on my time. Sure, they suggested, it was just another case of the "Peter Principle."

(Which is, for anyone who missed one of the more intriguing pop cultural concepts of the Seventies, the idea that we all rise to our own level of incompetence . . . the point where we're finally inadequate.)

It was *not* a case of the Peter Principle, I said. I came to these Gaming columns because I knew the field, in toto, better than anyone. Period.

Then I went to Milwaukee for Gen-Con/Origins and was delighted, and surprised, to find myself waxing enthusiastic over the new releases, discovering hidden gems. Games have been a love of mine for most of my life. And it looked as if, despite everything, they would continue to be.

So herewith some highlights from the show, capsule comments on the games that leaped out at me, shouting "take me home . . ."

This convention was notable for the number of computer companies that displayed new software. Slowly, the computer companies are beginning to see the connection between the game hobby and the computer. Mindscape had a smashing SF French import called *Captain Blood,* as well as *Willow,* both featuring exciting graphics. SSI presented its first Advanced Dungeons & Dragons computer games, including the fantasy role-playing game of *Pool of Radiance.*

Electronic Arts was running *Wasteland,* a post-apocalyptic rp adventure, on its screens. *Wasteland* also employed designers from the world of role-playing. FASA devoted part of their massive Bat-

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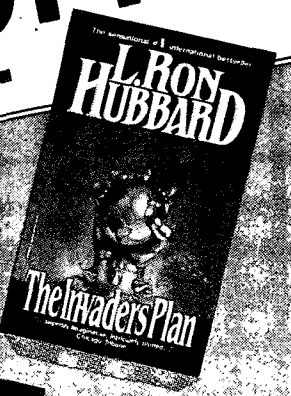

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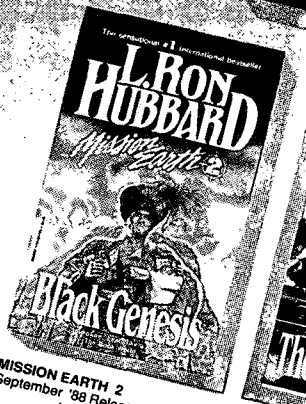

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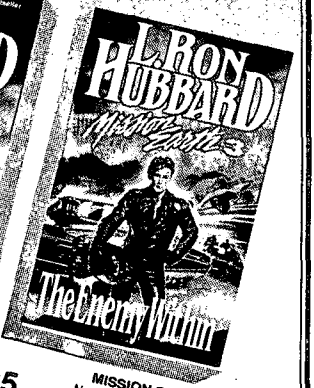

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tletech display to showing the new computer game, *Battletech,* from Infocom. Infocom has some exciting projects on the way, embracing graphics with all the sophistication and finesse that have graced their classic text adventures.

Origin Systems introduced the latest in its popular fantasy role-playing series, *Ultima V.* A new company, Command Simulations, showed *Blitzkrieg at the Ardennes,* one of the best-looking computer war simulations that I've seen.

There were also many exciting board and role-playing releases. TSR's *Buck Rogers Battle for the 25th Century* takes the four-color hero and gives him a game any kid from the Thirties would have died for. Similar to the Gamemaster series from Milton Bradley, Buck comes with 360 playing pieces — including troopers, mutant soldiers, fighters, and other nifty plastic miniatures. There are two sets of rules, basic and advanced, and the game looked like the hit of the convention.

The Avalon Hill Game Company introduced *Merchant of Venus,* an SF trading game, with an interesting solitaire system that lets you play with anywhere from 1 to 6 players. Game Designers' Workshop previewed *Sky Galleons of Mars,* the first release in their *Space: 1889* series. It's another game with plastic pieces, this time miniature cloudships and sky galleons.

West End Games had a mock-up of a new Star Wars boardgame, *Escape at Hoth,* based on the icy opening sequence from the film *The Empire Strikes Back.* FASA had a new game for its own Interstellar Rebel series, *Renegade Legion.* Called *Circus Imperium,* the game features a cut-out arena where the futuristic emperors can engage in some updated chariot races.

Role-playing games and supplements didn't seem as prevalent as in other years, but there were some interesting new items promised. Palladium Books had the *Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtle Guide to the Universe* and occult/horror role-playing game, *Beyond the Supernatural* (which features a great Richard Corben cover). *Jorune,* one of the past few years' most intriguing SF role-playing games, introduced a background volume, *Earth-Tec. Ars Magica,* from Lion Rampant, offers a detailed magic system. (It also won the Gamer's Choice for Best Fantasy Role-Playing Game.)

There was much more . . . a *Kings & Things* Play-By-Mail Game, a game based on the comic *Albedo, Enemy In Sight,* a Naval Card Game from The Avalon Hill Game Company and Nova's latest Lost Worlds set, *The Dwarf and Goblin Wars.* ●

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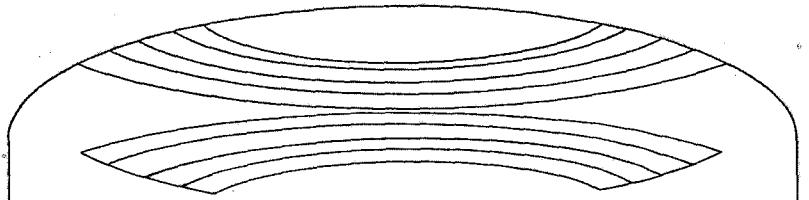

UP FLASHING

through realms of airy possibility,
the ether thinning round my craft
and then the craft itself,
until I'm only a needle wide projection
quivering back and forth across
the bell shaped curve of future lines
where fractals propagate and splay,

where all that could be lies,
where visions I will soon forget
arrest my thoughts with consequence
and orchestrated holocausts transpire,
past public gardens ripe with fruit
and inescapable dystopias of need,

all this and more the log replays,
and though I know the voice is mine,
my memories have shunned descent,
I cannot hold tomorrow in my head;
with random cause and stray effect
the future comes and comes again

in microcosms and in worlds on high,
it's graven soon as soon can be,
hardwired in our histories,
and still I scan unwritten texts,
anticipate the flight to next,
and scope the growth within the seed
to feed my timebound curiosities.

—Bruce Boston

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THE FEW, THE PROUD

by Harlan Ellison

The last one to know the truth about why a war is being fought is the guy expected to die for that waving flag.

art: Terry Lee

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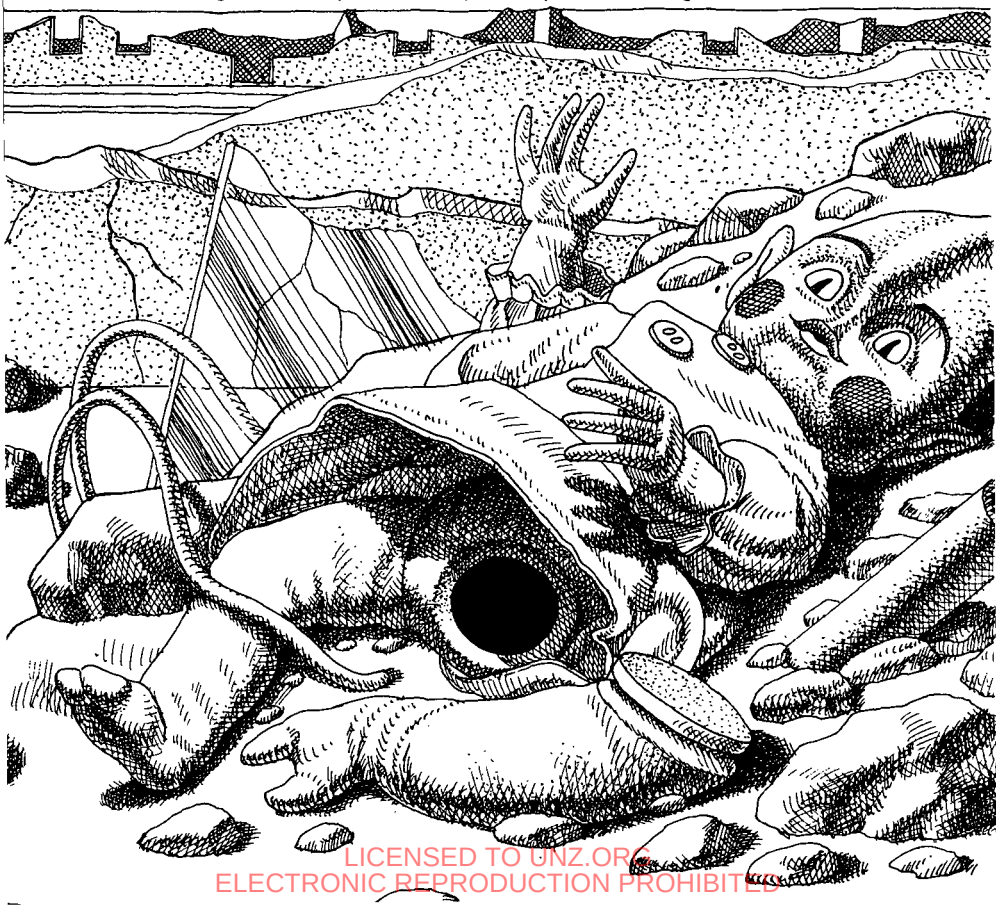

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The means by which they had tracked him, though secret, was idiotically simple. It came as a result of the *naïveté* that universally gulled all recruits to the Terran Expeditionary Force. Set afire by subliminal messages encoded in the recruitment assaults, young men and women of the united Earth rushed to enlist, to fight the monstrous Kyben, and they put their trust, put their honor, put their lives in the hands of a planetary government that assured them danger, far traveling and—if they were bold—eventual total victory over the alien scum. And so, whey-faced and trusting, they came to the recruitment depots and enlisted. As part of their induction, they received a thorough physical. As part of the physical, they received a tiny implant in the Orbital Region, passing between the fibers of the Orbicularis to be inserted into the skin of the lid, inner surface of the tarsal ligament. Should the recruit still retain some scintilla of individuality that had survived the fever of patriotic fervor, and should he or she inquire, "What is that thing you're putting in there?" he or she would be told with lambs-wool sincerity, "Well, you know, something *could* happen . . . you might not make it back . . . and, well . . . it's not something anyone likes to think about, but if you didn't make it . . . well, it's just an i.d. for the Graves Registration unit." Accompanying these reluctant words was a quiet manner of such humane fatalism, that the recruit would invariably smile and say, "Hey, I understand. I know it's rough out there and I might buy it. Just a precaution; I understand." And, secure in the knowledge that the government cared enough to make sure his or her body parts would not be scrambled with someone else's, they accepted the implant with pride and courage. In this way, they were all gulled. The implant was a tracking device. So when he went AWOL, the means by which they tracked him, though secret, was idiotically simple. He carried the beacon in his eye. When they got around to him, a three-MP team of "rabbit finders" had no trouble locating him living among the *chonaras* in the delta lands of the subcontinent the natives called Lokaul, on the fifth planet of the binary system designated by the Celestial Ephemeris as SS 433. No trouble at all: they rode in on the beacon of his eye. And when he ran, they came down in skimmers and burned a ring around him in the marshland; and they drove him toward the denuded center; and they dropped a tangle-web on him; and they schlepped him aloft and bounced him into their scoutship; and they warped him back to TEF Mainbase on Cueball, the ringed planet orbiting Sirius, to be court-martialed and to stand trial. By that time, of course, the charge against him was not Absent Without Leave: it had been upgraded to Desertion Under Fire.

His name was Del Spingarn, he was a Dropshaft Sapper 2nd Class, and he had cut out during the battle of Molkey's Ash.

And this was a serious matter, because—after all—There Was a War

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On. It happened in the eighty-fifth year of the war between Earth and Kyba.

Do I have anything to say before sentence is passed?

You betcher ass I do.

Oh, sorry, sir, I know I'm supposed to show respect for this Court, but since I know sure as snuffers sip shit that you're going to toss me into a starfire chamber and blow my atoms to goofer dust, I figure there isn't a whole helluva lot you can do to me if I fully invoke Section Fifty of the UCMJ and tell my tale nice and slow, and just the way I feel like it.

UCMJ. I've always *loved* that. The Uniform Code of Military Justice. That's one of those phrases that contradicts itself, don't you think? Like Military Intelligence. Or Free Will. I forget the name for what they call those. But "Military Justice!" That's a killer. And *you're* a killer. And even me, *I* was a killer. Just like my Grampa. Which is what my story's all about, since this is my parting statement.

So just let your asses itch, you Officers and Gennulmen up there sitting in judgment of Spingarn, because Section Fifty says I can bore you till I go hoarse. After which, I'll go ever so quietly downshaft to the starfire and let you disperse the crap out of me.

But before that, I'll tell you about my Grampa Louie.

That was Louie on my mother's side. My Grampa Wendell died when I was eleven. He was my dad's father. Nice old guy with a lousy sense of humor, but he doesn't figure in this story at all; I just didn't want to leave him out.

But Grampa Louie, ah, there was a guy! Came back from three tours out in the Pleiades with a sash full of citations and medals and honoraries, not one of which meant doodly when he went to buy the shots that were supposed to retard the nerve damage from catching too many shortbursts. But, oh, what a prideful thing Grampa Louie was to the family. An authentic hero of the War.

We used to pull out the ghost-cube and run the hologram of Grampa Louie getting his medals; every time someone new came to visit. We'd snap in the ghoster and everyone would see Grampa up there on the dais with no less than President Gorman and three Phalanx Generals and Greer McCarthy, that redhead who used to be on the vid. You remember, she starred in that series about the undercover Terran agent; she was very popular at the time. Hell, you remember, don't you? Lots of people thought she was President Gorman's lover, but both of them denied it even after Liza Gorman's term was up and she wrote her autobio. Denied it right to the end, both of them; but I always thought that Gorman bringing flowers to Greer McCarthy's sepulcher every year on the anniversary of her suicide really told the true story.

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Oh. I can see you're getting annoyed that I keep straying off the main line. Sorry about that fellas, but you remember Scheherazade: as long as she kept telling her tale, the Sultan couldn't lop off her head. But I'll get on with it.

The thing about it, you see, was that Grampa Louie was so damned *humble* about it all. He wasn't the *most* decorated grunt in the War, maybe, but he never bragged about what all he'd done, he turned away compliments and just settled down to being a guy with an illustrious past, and letting others do the bragging.

Even that day when they gave him all that metal for his sash, he just thanked the President and shook her hand, and took the kiss from Greer McCarthy and the salutes from the Generals and the laserlight salvo and the standing ovation, and just nodded, with his eyes checking out his boots. Like, well, did you ever see the ghoster of Jimmy Stewart in *Mr. Smith Goes to Washington*? Grampa Louie was like that. Just a real nice guy, kind of sweet and embarrassed at all the fuss. Just being a real hero but not stuck up about it, the way we like to see a special sort of man who's done remarkable things, but not making a big wind of it.

And then, when the great-great grandson of Gutzon Borglum picked Grampa Louie to be the model for the War Memorial Wall, and he was so humble he refused, saying he wasn't worthy to represent all the grunts who'd bought it in the War, it took a direct appeal from the President before he agreed.

That wall's still standing. In big carved letters it says OUR GLORIOUS DEAD and there's my Grampa Louie, stripped to the waist, wearing his blast helmet and packing a squirtgun, with his boot on a Kyban battle bonnet. Of course, by the time I was old enough to see the Wall, Grampa Louie was already an old man, and he didn't have the muscles any more, and he needed a cane to get around. But at least Borglum was smart enough to put the blast helmet on the sculpture so he didn't have to show the scars Grampa Louie had.

Did I forget to mention the scars?

They were awful. A lot worse after the radiation turned him bald and you could see where the red ripping of the short-burst had cut bloodlines from almost the top of his head, down past his right eye—he damned near had lost it—and all the way to his chin. They were parallel lines, like bullet train tracks, right onto his lips at the corner of his mouth. Always red, like blood was coming out of them, even though they'd scabbed over a long time ago.

So with all that, you can imagine how proud I was of my Grampa. *He* was the model for the Glorious Grunt, for all the men and women who'd eaten dust in the War. My Grampa.

When we'd go out for a walk, I'd always make him take me past the

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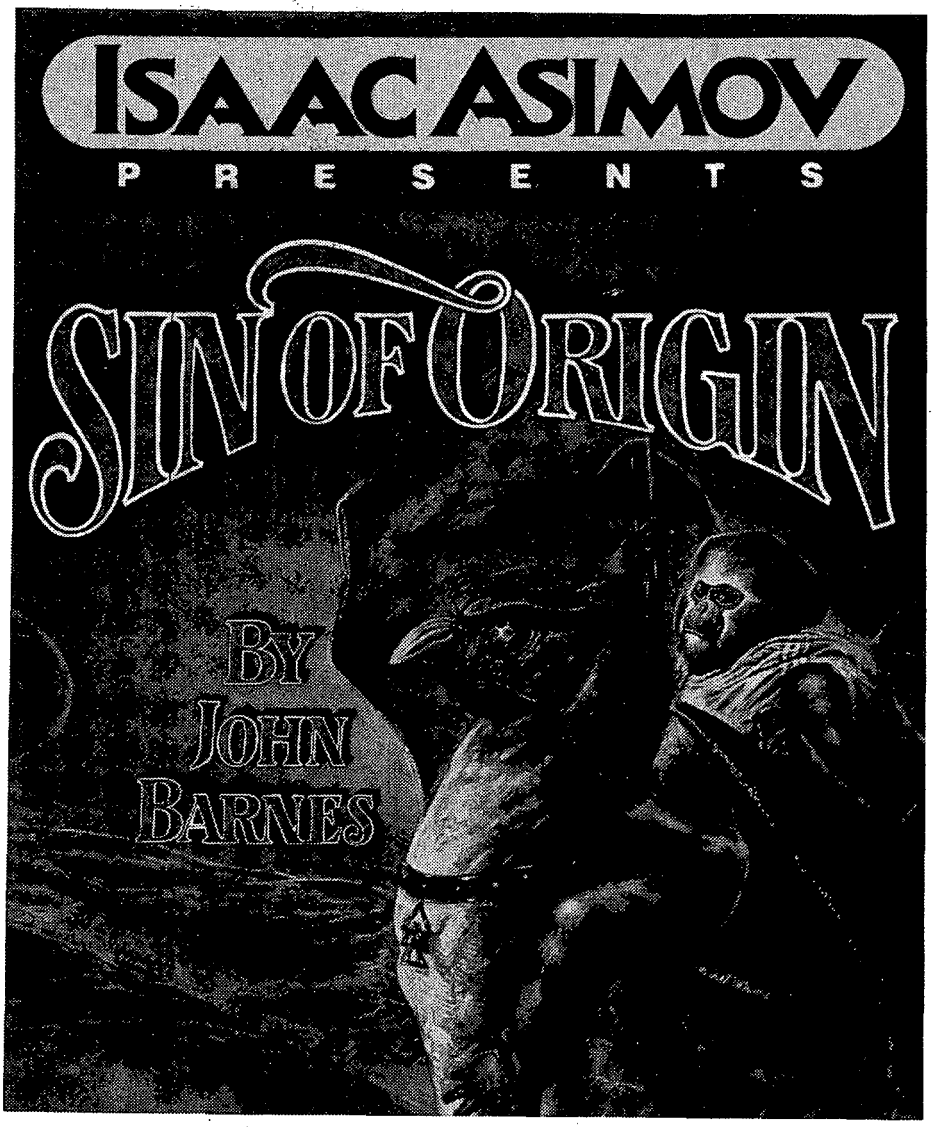

"Only the very best science fiction starts arguments, and people will be arguing over this book for many years to come."

--Janet Kagan

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Wall. He hated doing it, just this kind and humble guy who didn't want to make a big thing of being a hero. But I'd cry and blow snot out of my face till he did it . . . and oh yeah, how I loved to look up there at what Grampa Louie had been like when he'd come back, years before I was born.

But he'd mumble something self-effacing and drag my ass down the street before somebody made the connection. And as the years went by, I couldn't wait till I was old enough to enlist and go out there to take up where Grampa Louie had left off. We weren't doing too well in the War at that time. It was after the Kyben bastards had nuked Deald's World, and they were dunkin' us real good. But I was just a kid, so the best I could do was put the pins in my star map, to follow the battles, and play Sappers'n'Snipers with the other kids. And just wait till I was growed-up enough to make my mark on the recruiter's readout.

And finally, when I turned thirteen, that was seven years ago, I went in the day after my birthday, and I joined up.

It was the proudest day in my life.

You probably can't know about something like that! You Officers and Gennulmen likely all graduated from Sandhurst, and got commissioned straightaway into a Phalanx post. But for me, to be the grandson of the man who'd come out of the Pleiades crusher and been a full-Earth hero . . . well, it was the best thing I'd ever done, or ever *would* do!

My family was so damned proud of me.

Even Grampa Louie. He was so choked up about it all, he wouldn't even come down out of his room for the farewell dinner my family and friends threw for me. He just locked himself in and said goodbye to me through the door.

And as I walked away, kind of sad that Grampa Louie hadn't come out to hug me and say take care of yourself, kid, he called me through the door; and I went back, and listened close because he was an old, old man by that time; and he said, "Try to come back, Del. I love you, kid." And I'd have cried, but I was going off to the War, and grunts don't groan.

So I left the next day, and they sent me to Croix Noir, and I did my training for Dropshaft service, and came out third highest in my class, and then I did the eighty-days on Kestral V, and made 2nd Class forty-six days into the rigor. You can't know how proud my family was, and they wrote and looked just as proud as birds in the ghoster, and though Grampa Louie didn't come down to get holo'd, they told me he was as puffed up about me being in Dropshaft as they were, and to go out there and let the yellow stuff flow!

Which is what I did.

They booted me out over Strawhill and I rode the dropshaft into coun-

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try, and we took Borag and Hyqa and the whole archipelago at Insmel. I got *this* at Insmel, this nice transparent cheek here.

TEF pulled us out of there and I went straight on through inverspace to Black's Nebula. That was sweet, too. Lost half our complement there. They were waiting when we popped out of inver. Wiped two dreadnoughts and a troop condo before we'd pushed our eyeballs back into their sockets. They were all over the scan. Men-of-wars and little kickass wasps from the top of the screen to the bottom. And there was just a little poof of implode and a couple of thousand grunts were stardust.

But we got a few loads through, and I went shaft and tried to make my way to the primary, and on the way I got tossed and went in a hundred and fifty kliks shy of the bull. Some kind of a little city, not a major target, but with enough of a home defense system to raise some mist around me. So I burned them.

Turned the beams loose on full, and just swept the goddam town. That wasn't smart. First thing they tell you in Sapper school is, "Don't ever get close enough to see them burn."

I got too close. First time I ever saw anything like that. Wasn't like what they'd taught us it would be. There were old guys like my Grampa Louie, and old women, and kids, and those dog-things they keep for pets . . . and all of them splitting and popping like bags of pus. They'd bubble and the eyes would explode from the inside. The hair sizzled and the gold skin split, and you could see bone for a second before it all turned black and they fell in like finishing a bag of popcorn and crushing the bag in your hands. I saw a kid, a little girl, I guess, and she looked straight into the screen as I passed over, and she opened her mouth to scream, and her mouth just kept going, right across her face, and then the bottom came away, and she was running in circles and flapping her hands, and I saw all her parts before they turned into stew.

You motherfuckers never told me about that part of it, did you?

Never told me they look a lot like us. Oh sure, they got golden skin, and those eyes, and the little worm fingers. But they're not like the ghosters you showed us! They're *not*, are they? Where's the guy who phonyed up those Kyben monsters for the bond drive ghosters, for the holos that got all of us to join up before we'd learned to wipe our asses? Where *is* that talented sonofabitch? I'd like to give him an Oscar. 'Cause *they don't look like that*!

I'm okay.

Gimme a minute. Just to clean up.

Yeah. Swell. I'm just swell.

I did the job for you. That kid would never invade old Earth. Took her right out.

But it was the old ones that did it to me. The old ones just like my

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Grampa Louie, that I adored. You should see what old Kyben have inside them. A lot of stuff that wriggles before it bursts. I guess that was what the guy who phonyed up the monsters *meant* to show, but he never got any closer to the real thing than any of us do. We just hang out there in space and dump. And when the Sappers go in, it's whambam and out so fuckin' fast all you see is a new sunrise.

The old ones. Gawd, it was just swell. Just . . . swell.

And I was a hero. Like my Grampa Louie.

I got a citation, and a month Earthside.

They snapped me back through inverspace, and I got scrip for a thirty-day repple-depple, and I went home.

It was all I could do to face my family. I wanted to puke. They couldn't stop showing me off to the neighbors. And when the ghosters came to interview me, I just said I was too whacked to talk, and they ran all that bullshit my family put on like the Sunday tablecloth, and I just sat there and stared.

For a day and a half I didn't have the guts to go up and see Grampa Louie. But finally, when I couldn't stand it any more, I knew I had to go tell him I wasn't like him, that I'd come to hate it, and take what he had to say, and just swallow it. But I knew in my heart that I was no more a hero like him than I was an angel. So I went up.

At first he wouldn't unlock the door.

"Grampa, jeezus, I got to talk to you! I'm in Hell, Grampa!"

And he opened the door, and looked at me with his last good eye, and the bullet train scars so red and painful looking, and he was a lot older and closer to the dust than I'd ever seen him. And he was crying. He was crying for me.

And I came through and his old, thin body was around me, him hugging and whispering stuff, and I just laid my head on his shoulder and let it all go.

After a long time we sat down on the edge of his bed, and he told me to tell him all of it. So I did, with snot running down my face, and my hands making these stupid gestures in the air, me trying to grab onto something wasn't there, and Grampa Louie overflowing, too.

And when I got done, and couldn't even gasp any more, he said, "It was a long time ago, and I don't know if it was Pope Gregory XI or Innocent II, I've heard it both ways; but it was in the tenth century sometime. They invented the hand crossbow. It was so awful a weapon that the Pope, whichever one it was, he said, 'This weapon is so horrible that it will surely end all wars,' and he wouldn't let them use it. At least for a while. Then they decided that as terrible as it was, Christians couldn't use it against each other . . . but they could kill the lousy Mohammedans with it."

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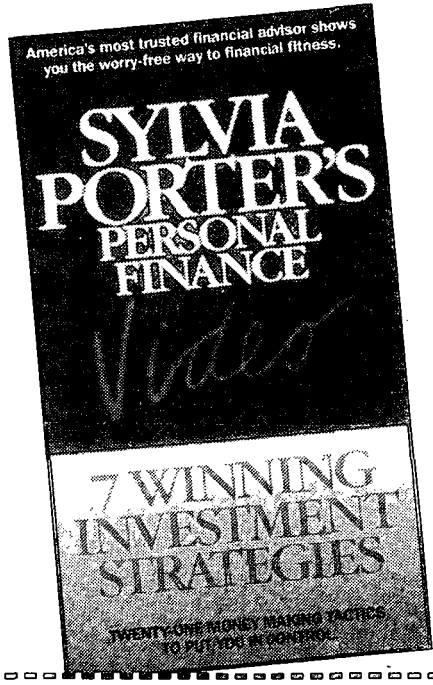
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He looked at me. "You know what I'm telling you, Del?"

I said I knew perfectly, what he was telling me.

Then he told me something no one else but him in the whole galaxy knew. Something he'd wanted to take to the grave.

And I loved him more, and hated him more, and suffered with him more, and despised him more, than I had ever loved and hated and suffered with or despised anyone in my life, except myself. "What'm I gonna do, Grampa?"

So he told me what to do. What *he* would've done twenty years ago, but didn't have the courage to do, especially since he was a hero.

And that's what I did, you Officers and Gennulmen. I cut out during Molkey's Ash, and I kept going. Maybe before you toss me into the starfire chamber you'll confide how it was you tracked my ass down, and maybe you'll keep it to yourself. But I'll make you a deal.

You tell me how you found me, and *I'll* tell you what Grampa Louie told me that was a secret. Whaddaya say?

Aw, hell, c'mon. What've you got to lose?

We got a deal?

You'll keep your word? Sure, I know you will. You're Officers and Gennulmen, and we're all just grunts in the TEF, right? So, okay, here it is:

Grampa Louie just *hated* it when I'd drool over his model up there on the Wall. Used to drag my scrawny kid's ass away as fast as he could, not because he really gave a damn that someone might spot him and make a big who-struck-John about him being the hero of the Pleiades, but because he knew he was a fraud. He was a killer, and *you're* killers, and me, *I* was a killer, too.

He hadn't gotten those blast scars in battle. He'd gotten them from the Kyban woman he was trying to stick it up the ass of. There wasn't any sex in it. He was just horny, and he'd been out there forever, and he didn't give a shit what it would do to her, or anything. He was just the kind of guy you train us to be. Real grunts.

And she burned him. And he stomped in her head with a boot just like that boot he's wearing up there on the Wall you all admire and drool over so much. He just smashed in her head like that Kyban battle bonnet on the sculpture.

My Grampa Louie was just like me. *Just* like me. One of the few, the proud. The shit you made believe all that *hail to us ain't we the best in the universe* crap!

Get out, Del. That's what my Grampa Louie told me. Get out before they make you what I am, before they kill you and you never get a chance to say you're sorry. Because there's no way to say I'm sorry. And there's no way to get over hating yourself for being so goddam dumb that you

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buy into all that *kill the Mohammedans* bullshit. Get out, kid. Hightail it, get out, and don't stop.

So now I'm getting hoarse, and that's my tale, Sirs.

Now you gonna tell me how you tracked me?

You gonna tell me in exchange for the honor of my Grampa Louie, who put a squirtgun on that goddam Wall the week after I shipped out again, and blew a chunk out of it before the cops wasted him, not knowing he was the guy up there on the sculpture? You ready to tell me?

Well?

Whaddaya say? I'm waiting.

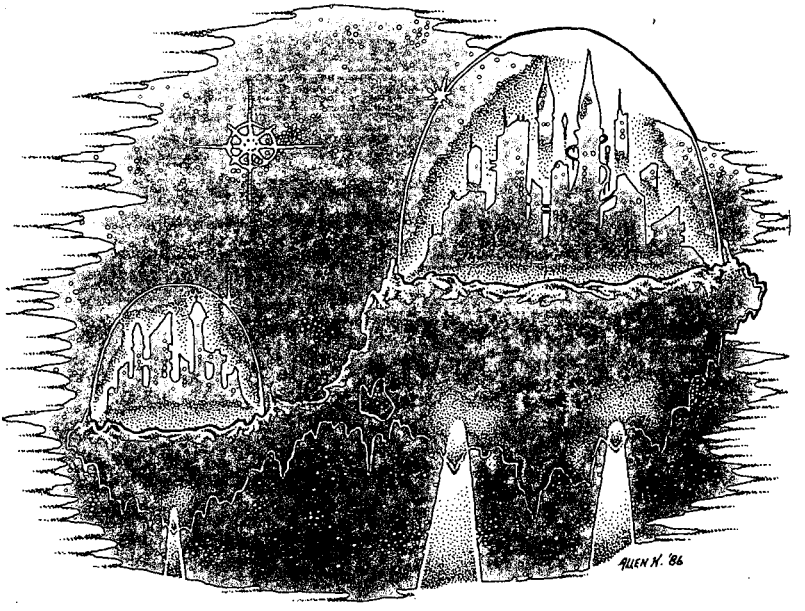
What . . . ? You *what*!?

Why, you sonsofbitches, you no-good rotten bastards!

Right into the starfire?

You *bastards*!

You lied to me! You *lied* to me. ○



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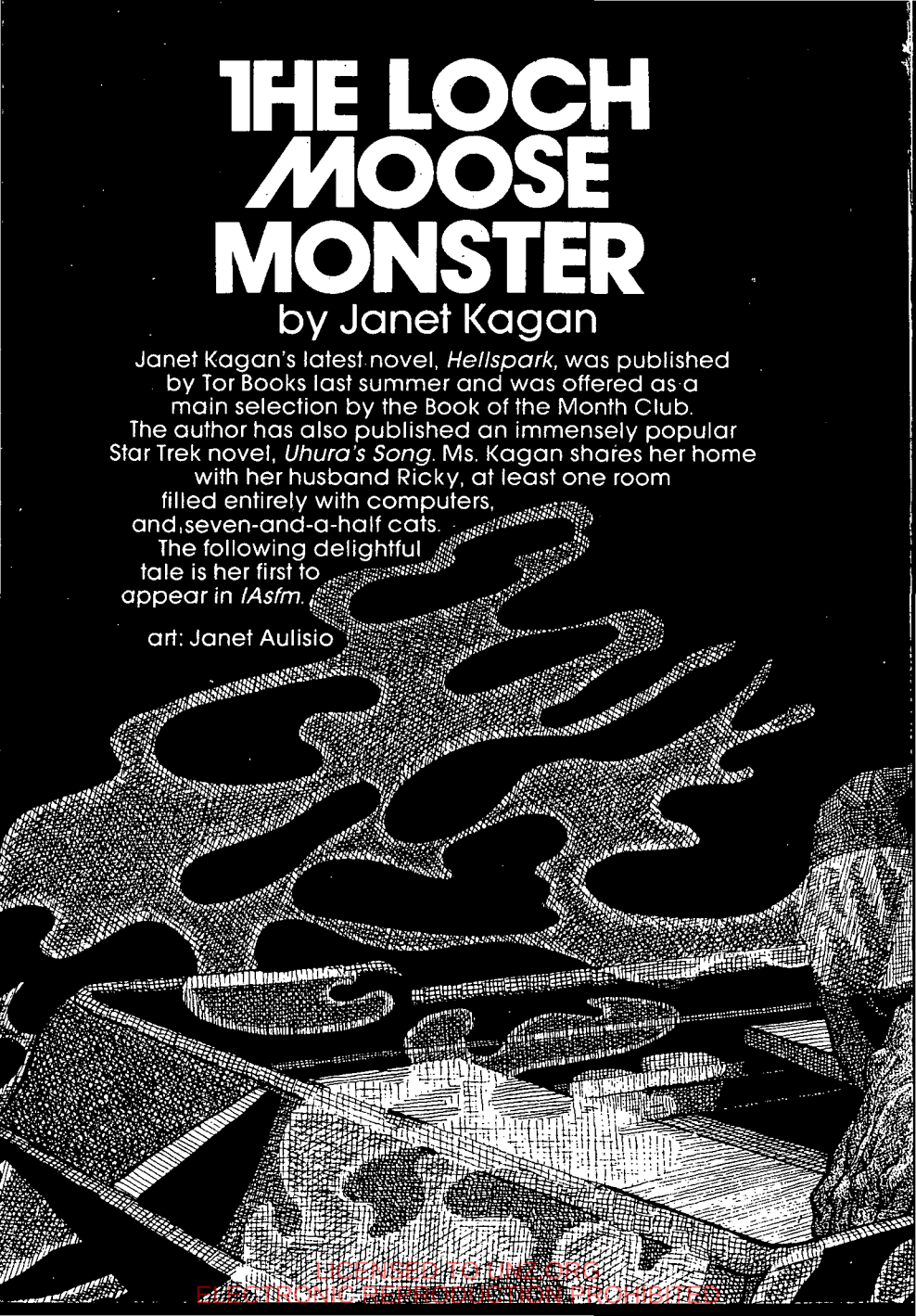
THE LOCH MOOSE MONSTER

by Janet Kagan

Janet Kagan's latest novel, *Hellspark*, was published by Tor Books last summer and was offered as a main selection by the Book of the Month Club. The author has also published an immensely popular Star Trek novel, *Uhura's Song*. Ms. Kagan shares her home with her husband Ricky, at least one room filled entirely with computers, and seven-and-a-half cats. The following delightful tale is her first to appear in *IAsfm*.

art: Janet Aulisio



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This year the Ribeiros' daffodils seeded early and they seeded cockroaches. Now ecologically speaking, even a cockroach has its place—but these suckers *bit*. That didn't sound Earth authentic to me. Not that I care, mind you, all I ask is useful. I wasn't betting on that either.

As usual, we were short-handed—most of the team was up-country trying to stabilize a herd of Guernseys—which left me and Mike to throw a containment tent around the Ribeiro place while we did the gene-reads on the roaches and the daffodils that spawned 'em. Dragon's Teeth, sure enough, and worse than useless. I grabbed my gear and went in to clean them out, daffodils and all.

By the time I crawled back out of the containment tent, exhausted, cranky, and thoroughly bitten, there wasn't a daffodil left in town. Damn fools. If I'd told 'em the roaches were Earth authentic they'd have cheered 'em, no matter how obnoxious they were.

I didn't even have the good grace to say hi to Mike when I slammed into the lab. The first thing out of my mouth was, "The red daffodils—in front of Sagdeev's."

"I got 'em," he said. "Nick of time, but I got 'em. They're in the greenhouse—"

We'd done a gene-read on that particular patch of daffodils the first year they'd flowered red: they promised to produce a good strain of preying mantises, probably Earth authentic. We both knew how badly Mirabile needed insectivores. The other possibility was something harmless but pretty that ship's records called "fireflies." Either would have been welcome, and those idiots had been ready to consign both to a fire.

"I used the same soil, Annie, so don't give me that look."

"Town's full of fools," I growled, to let him know that look wasn't aimed at him. "Same soil, fine, but can we match the rest of the environmental conditions those preying mantises need in the goddamn greenhouse?"

"It's the best we've got," he said. He shrugged and his right hand came up bandaged. I glared at it.

He dropped the bandaged hand behind the lab bench. "They were gonna burn 'em. I couldn't—" He looked away, looked back. "Annie, it's nothing to worry about—"

I'd have done the same myself, true, but that was no reason to let *him* get into the habit of taking fool risks.

I started across to check out his hand and give him pure hell from close up. Halfway there the com blatted for attention. Yellow light on the console, meaning it was no emergency, but I snatched it up to deal with the interruption before I dealt with Mike. I snapped a "Yeah?" at the screen.

"Mama Jason?"

Nobody calls me that but Elly's kids. I glowered at the face on screen:

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my age, third-generation Mirabilan, and not so privileged. "Annie Jason Masmajean," I corrected, "Who wants to know?"

"Leonov Bellmaker Denness at this end," he said. "I apologize for my improper use of your nickname." Ship's manners—he ignored my rudeness completely.

The name struck me as vaguely familiar but I was in no mood to search my memory; I'd lost my ship's manners about three hours into the cockroach clean-out. "State your business," I said.

To his credit, he did: "Two of Elly's lodgers claim there's a monster in Loch Moose. By their description, it's a humdinger."

I was all ears now. Elly runs the lodge at Loch Moose for fun—her profession's raising kids. (Elly Raiser Roget, like her father before her. Our population is still so small we can't afford to lose genes just because somebody's not suited, one way or another, for parenting.) A chimera anywhere near Loch Moose was a potential disaster. Thing of it was, Denness didn't sound right for that. "Then why aren't *they* making this call?"

He gave a deep-throated chuckle. "They're in the dining room gorging themselves on Chris's shrimp. I doubt they'll make you a formal call when they're done. Their names are Emile Pilot Stirzaker and Francois Cobbler Pastides and, right now, they can't spell either without dropping letters."

So he thought they'd both been smoking dumbweed. Fair enough. I simmered down and reconsidered him. I'd've bet money he was the one who side-tracked Pastides and Stirzaker into the eating binge.

Recognition struck at last: this was the guy Elly's kids called "Noisy." The first thing he'd done on moving into the neighborhood was outshout every one of 'em in one helluva contest. He was equally legendary for his stories, his bells, and his ability to keep secrets. I hadn't met him, but I'd sure as hell heard tell.

I must have said the nickname aloud, because Denness said, "Yes, 'Noisy.' Is that enough to get me a hearing?"

"It is." It was my turn to apologize. "Sorry. What more do you want me to hear?"

"You should, I think, hear Stirzaker imitate his monster's bellow of rage."

It took me a long moment to get his drift, but get it I did. "I'm on my way," I said. I snapped off and started repacking my gear.

Mike stared at me. "Annie? What did I miss?"

"*You* ever know anybody who got auditory hallucinations on dumbweed?"

"Shit," he said, "No." He scrambled for his own pack.

"Not you," I said. "I need you here to coddle those daffodils, check the

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environmental conditions that produced 'em, and call me if Dragon's Teeth pop up anywhere else." I shouldered my pack and finished with a glare and a growl: "That should be enough to keep you out of bonfires while I'm gone, shouldn't it?"

By the time I grounded in the clearing next to Elly's lodge, I'd decided I was on a wild moose chase. Yeah, I know the Earth authentic is wild *goose,* but "wild moose" was Granddaddy Jason's phrase. He'd known Jason—the original first generation Jason—well before the Dragon's Teeth had started popping up.

One look at the wilderness where Elly's lodge is now and Jason knew she had the perfect EC for moose. She hauled the embryos out of ship's storage and set them thawing. Built up a nice little herd of the things and turned 'em loose. Not a one of them survived—damn foolish creatures died of a taste for a Mirabilan plant they couldn't metabolize.

Trying to establish a viable herd got to be an obsession with Jason. She must've spent years at it, off and on. She never succeeded but somebody with a warped sense of humor named the lake Loch Moose and it stuck, moose or no moose.

Loch Moose looked as serene as it always did this time of year. The waterlilies were in full bloom—patches of velvety red and green against the sparkles of sunlight off the water. Here and there I saw a ripple of real trout, Earth authentic.

On the bank to the far right, Susan's troop of otters played tag, skidding down the incline and hitting the water with a splash. They whistled encouragement to each other like a pack of fans at a ballgame. Never saw a creature have more pure *fun* than an otter—unless it was a dozen otters, like now.

The pines were that dusty gold that meant I'd timed it just right to see Loch Moose smoke. There's nothing quite so beautiful as that drift of pollen fog across the loch. It would gild rocks and trees alike until the next rainfall.

Monster, my ass—but where better for a wild moose chase?

I clambered down the steps to Elly's lodge, still gawking at the scenery, so I was totally unprepared for the EC in the lobby. If that bright-eyed geneticist back on Earth put the double-whammy on any of the human genes in the cold banks they sent along (*swore* they hadn't, but after the kangaroo rex, damnify believe anything the old records tell me), the pandemonium I found would have been enough to kick off Dragon's Teeth by the dozens.

Amid the chaos, Ilanith, Elly's next-to-oldest, was handling the oversized gilt ledger with great dignity. She lit up when she saw me and waved. Then she bent down for whispered conversation. A second later

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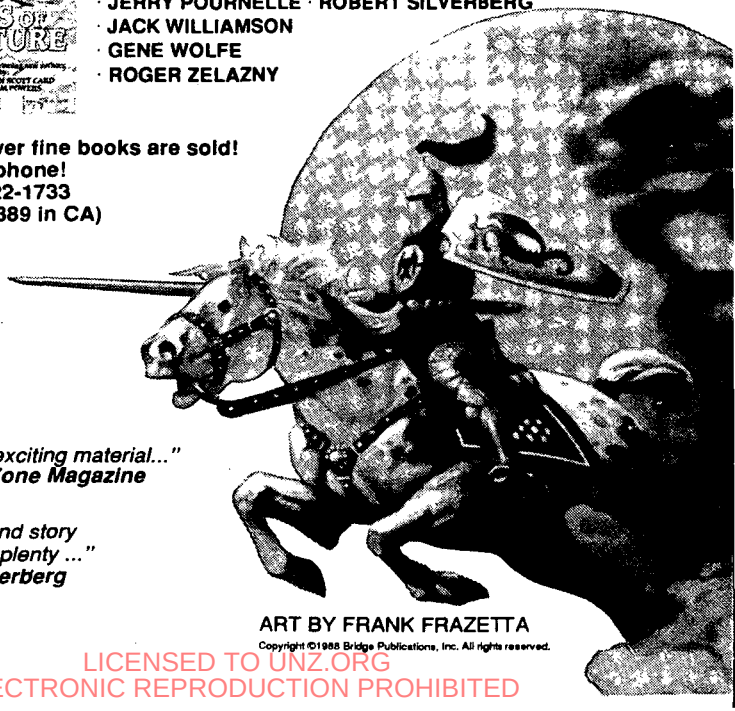

ART BY FRANK FRAZETTA

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Jen, the nine-year-old, exploded from behind the desk, bellowing, "Elleeeeee! Nois-eeeeee! Come quick! Mama Jason's here!" The kid's lung-power cut right through the chaos and startled the room into a momentary hush. She charged through the door to the dining room, still trying to shout the house down.

I took advantage of the distraction to elbow my way to the desk and Ilanith.

She squinted a little at me, purely Elly in manner, and said, "Bet you got hopped on by a kangaroo rex this week. You're *real* snarly."

"Can't do anything about my face," I told her. "And it was biting cockroaches." I pushed up a sleeve to show her the bites.

"Bleeeeeh," she said, with an inch or two of tongue for emphasis. "I hope they weren't keepers."

"Just the six I saved to put in your bed. Wouldn't want you to think I'd forgotten you."

She wrinkled her nose at me and flung herself across the desk to plant a big sloppy kiss on my cheek. "Mama Jason, you are the world's biggest tease. But I'm gonna give you your favorite room anyhow—" she wrinkled her nose in a very different fashion at the couple to my right "—since *those two* just checked out of it."

One of the *those two* peered at me like a myopic crane. I saw recognition strike, then he said, "We've changed our minds. We'll keep the room."

"Too late," said Ilanith—and she was smug about it. "But, if you want to stay, I can give you one on the other side of the lodge. No view." Score one for the good guys, I thought.

"See, Elly?" It was Jen, back at a trot beside Elly and dragging Noisy behind her. "See?" Jen said again. "If Mama Jason's here, I won't have to go away, right?"

"Right," I said.

"Oh, Jen!" Elly dropped to one knee to pull Jen into one of her full-body-check hugs. "Is *that* what's been worrying you? Leo already explained to your mom. There's no monster—nobody's going to send you away from Loch Moose!"

Jen, who'd been looking relieved, suddenly looked suspicious. "If there's no monster, why's Mama Jason here?"

"Need a break," I said, realizing I meant it. Seeing Elly and the kids was break enough all by itself. "Stomped enough Dragon's Teeth this week. I'm not about to go running after monsters that vanish at the first breath of fresh air."

Elly gave me a smile that would have thawed a glacier and my shoulders relaxed for the first time in what seemed like months.

I grinned back. "Have your two monster-sighters sobered up yet?"

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"Sobered up," reported Ilanith, "and checked out." She giggled. "You should have seen how red-faced they were, Mama Jason."

I glowered at no one in particular. "Just as well. After the day I had, they'd have been twice as red if I'd had to deal with 'em."

Elly rose to her feet, bringing Jen with her. The two of them looked me over, Jen imitating Elly's keen-eyed inspection. "We'd better get Mama Jason to her room. She needs a shower and a nap worse than any kid in the household."

Ilanith shook her head. "Let her eat first, Elly. By the time she's done, we'll have her room ready."

"Sounds good to me," I said, "if the kids waiting tables can take it."

"We raise a sturdy bunch around here. Go eat, Annie." She gave me a kiss on the cheek—I got a bonus kiss from Jen—and the two of them bustled off to get my room ready. I frowned after them: Jen still seemed worried and I wondered why.

Ilanith rounded the desk to grab my pack. Standing between me and Leo, she suddenly jammed her fists into her hips. "Oh, nuts. Ship's manners. Honestly, Mama Jason—how did people *ever* get acquainted in the old days?" With an expression of tried patience, she formally introduced the two of us.

I looked him over, this time giving him a fair shake. The face was as good as the reputation, all laugh lines etched deep. In return, I got inspected just as hard.

When nobody said anything for a full half second, Ilanith said, "More? You need more? Didn't I get it right?"

Leo gave a smile that was a match for Elly's. Definitely the EC, I thought. Then he thrust out a huge welcoming hand and said, "That's Leo to you, as I don't imagine I could outshout you."

That assessment visibly impressed Ilanith.

"Annie," I said. I took the hand. Not many people have hands the size of mine. In Denness I'd met my match for once. Surprised me how good that felt. He didn't let go immediately and I wasn't all that anxious for him to do so.

Ilanith eyed him severely. "Leo, there's no need to be grabby!" She tapped his hand, trying to make him let go.

"Shows how much you know about ship's manners," Leo said. "I was about to offer the lady my arm, to escort her into the dining room."

"Perfectly good old-time ritual," I said. "I can stand it if he can."

Leo held out his arm, ship's formal; I took it. We went off rather grandly, leaving Ilanith all the more suspicious that we'd made it up for her benefit.

Leo chuckled as we passed beyond her earshot. "She won't believe that until she double-checks with Elly."

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"I know. Good for 'em—check it out for yourself, I always say. Have *you* heard any bellowing off the loch?"

"Yes," he said, "I have heard a couple of unusual sounds off the loch lately. I've no way of knowing if they're all made by the same creature. But I've lived here long enough to know that these are new. One is a kind of sucking gurgle. Then there's something related to a cow's lowing—" he held up a hand "—*not* cow and *not* red deer either. I know both. And there's a bellow that'll bring you out of a sound sleep faster than a shotgun blast."

His lips flattened a bit. "I can't vouch for that one. I've *only* heard it awakening from sleep. It might have been a dream but it never *feels* like dream—and the bellow Stirzaker gave was a fair approximation of it."

The lines across his forehead deepened. "There's something else you should know, Annie. Jen's been acting spooked, and neither Elly nor I can make any sense of it."

"I saw. I thought she was still keyed up over the monster business."

He shook his head. "This started weeks ago, long before Stirzaker and Pastides got everybody stirred up."

"I'll see what I can find out."

"Anything I can do to help," he said. He swung his free hand to tell me how extensive that "anything" actually was. "On either count."

"Right now, you watch me eat a big plate of *my* shrimp with Chris's barbeque sauce on 'em."

Loch Moose was the only source of freshwater shrimp on Mirabile and they were one of my triumphs. Not just the way they tasted when Chris got done with them, but because I'd brought the waterlilies they came from myself and planted them down in Loch Moose on the chance they'd throw off something good. Spent three years making sure they stabilized. Got some pretty dragonflies out of that redundancy, too. Elly's kids use 'em for catching rock lobsters, which is another thing Chris cooks to perfection.

By the time I'd finished my shrimp, the dining room was empty except for a couple of people I knew to be locals like Leo. I blinked my surprise, I guess.

Leo said, "Most of the guests checked out this morning. Let's take advantage of it." He picked up my glass and his own and bowed me toward one of the empty booths.

I followed and sank, sighing, into overstuffed comfort. "Now," I said, "tell me what you heard from Stirzaker and Pastides."

He obliged in detail, playing both roles. When he was done, I appreciated his reputation for story-telling, but I knew as well he'd given me an accurate account, right down to the two of them tripping over each other's words in their excitement.

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Reaching for the Stars by Mark Mercury

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Their description of the chimera would have scared the daylights out of me—if they'd been able to agree on any given part of it aside from the size. Stirzaker had seen the thing reach for him with two great clawlike hands. Pastides had seen the loops of a water snake, grown to unbelievable lengths, undulate past him. They agreed again only when it came to the creature's bellow.

When all was said, I had to laugh. "I bet *their* granddaddy told *them* scary bedtime stories, too!"

"Good God," said Leo, grinning suddenly. "The Loch Ness Monster! I should have recognized it!"

"From which description?" I grinned back. Luckily the question didn't require an answer.

"Mama Jason!"

That was all the warning I got. Susan—all hundred pounds of her—pounced into my lap.

"They were *dumbstruck,* both of them," she said, her manner making it clear that this was the most important news of the century. "You should have seen them eat! Tell her, Noisy—you saw!"

"Hello to you too," I said, "and I just got the full story, complete with sound effects."

That settled her down a bit, but not much. At sixteen, nothing settles them *down.* Sliding into the seat beside me, she said, "Now you tell—about the biting cockroaches."

Well, I'd have had to tell that one sooner or later, so I told it for two, ending with Mike's heroic attempt to rescue the red daffodils.

Susan's eyes went dreamy. "Fireflies," she said. "Think how pretty they'd be around the lake at night!"

"I was," I said, all too curtly. "Sorry," I amended, "I'm still pissed off about them."

"I've got another one for you," Susan said, matching my scowl. "Rowena who lives about twenty miles that way—" she pointed, glanced at Leo (who nudged her finger about 5 degrees left), then went on "—*that* way, claims that the only way to keep from raising Dragon's Teeth is to spit tobacco on your plants whenever you go past them." She gave another glance at Leo, this one a different sort of query. "I think she *believes* that. I know she *does* it!"

" 'Fraid so," Leo said.

"Well, we'll know just what EC to check when something unusual pops out of Rowena's plants, won't we?" I sighed. The superstitions really were adding to our problems.

"Mama Jason," said Susan—with a look that accused me of making a joke much too low for her age level—"How many authentics need tobacco spit ECs to pop up?"

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"No joke, honey. It's not authentic species I'd expect under conditions like that. It'd be Dragon's Teeth plain and probably not so simple." I looked from one to the other. "Keep an eye on those plants for me. Anything suddenly flowers in a different color or a slightly different form, snag a sample and send it to me fast!"

They nodded, Susan looking pleased with the assignment, Leo slightly puzzled. At last Leo said, "I'm afraid I've never understood this business of Dragon's Teeth. . . ." He broke off, suddenly embarrassed.

"Fine," I said, "as long as you don't spit tobacco on the ragweed or piss on the petunias or toss the soapy washwater on the lettuce patch."

Susan eyed me askance. I said, "Last year the whole town of Misty Valley decided that pissing on the petunias was the only way to stabilize them." I threw up my hands to stave off the question that was already on the tip of Susan's tongue. "*I* don't know how that got started, so don't ask me. I'm not even sure I *want* to know!—The end result, of course, was that the petunias seeded ladybugs."

"Authentic?" Susan asked.

"No, but close enough to be valuable. Nice little insectivores and surprisingly well-suited for doing in ragmites." The ragmites are native and a bloody nuisance. "And before you ask," I added, "the things they *might* have gotten in the same EC included a very nasty species of poisonous ant and two different grain-eaters, one of which would chain up to a salamander with a taste for quail eggs."

"Oh, my!" said Susan, "Misty Valley's where we get our quail eggs!"

"So does everybody on Mirabile," I said. "Nobody's gotten the quail to thrive anywhere else yet." For Leo's benefit, I added, "So many of our Earth authentic species are on rocky ground, we can't afford to lose a lot of individuals to a Dragon's Tooth."

Leo still looked puzzled. After a moment, he shook his head. "I've never understood this business. Maybe for once I could get a simple explanation, suitable for a bellmaker. . . ?"

I gestured to Susan. "My assistant will be glad to give you the short course."

Susan gave one of those award-winning grins. "It goes all the way back to before we left Earth, Leo." Leo arched an eyebrow: " 'We'?" Susan punched him—lightly—on the arm and said, "You know what I mean! Humans!"

She heaved a dramatic sigh and went on in spite of it all. "They wanted to make sure we'd have everything we might possibly need."

"I thought that's why they sent along the embryo and gene banks," Leo said.

Susan nodded. "It was. But at the time there was a fad for redundancy—every system doubled, tripled, even quadrupled—so just to make

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sure we couldn't lose a species we might need, they built all that redundancy into the gene pool, too."

She glanced at me. She was doing fine, so I nodded for her to go on.

"Look, Noisy. They took the genes for, say, sunflowers and they tucked 'em into a twist in wheat helices. Purely recessive, but when the environmental conditions are right, maybe one one-hundredth of your wheat seeds will turn out to sprout sunflowers."

She leaned closer, all earnestness. "And one one-hundredth of the sunflowers, given the right EC, will seed bumblebees, and so on and so forth. That's what Mama Jason calls 'chaining up.' Eventually you might get red deer."

Leo frowned. "I don't see how you can go from plant to animal. . . ."

"There's usually an intermediate stage—a plant that comes out all wrong for that plant but perfect for an incubator for whatever's in the next twist." She paused dramatically, then finished, "As you can see, it was a perfectly *dumb* idea."

I decided to add my two bits here. "The *idea* wasn't as dumb as you make out, kiddo. They just hadn't worked the bugs out before they stuck us with it."

"When she says *bugs*," Susan confided grimly to Leo, "she *means* Dragon's Teeth."

I stepped in again. "Two things went wrong, Leo. First, there was supposed to be an easy way to turn anything other than the primary helix off and on at will. The problem is, that information was in the chunk of ship's records we lost and it was such new knowledge at the time that it didn't get passed to anyone on the ship.

"The second problem was the result of pure goof. They forgot that, in the long run, all plants and animals change to suit their environment. A new mutation may be just the thing for our wheat, but who knows what it's done to those hidden sunflowers? Those—and the chimerae—are the real Dragon's Teeth."

Leo turned to Susan. "Want to explain the chimerae as long as you're at it?"

"A chimera is something that's, well, sort of patched together from two, maybe three, different genetic sources. Ordinarily it's nothing striking—you'd probably only notice if you did a full gene-read. But with all those hidden sets of genes, just about anything can happen."

"Kangaroo rex, for example," I said. "That one was a true chimera: a wolf in kangaroo's clothing."

"I remember the news films," Leo said. "Nasty."

"Viable, too," I said. "That was a tough fight. I'm still sorry I lost." It still rankled, I discovered.

Leo looked startled.

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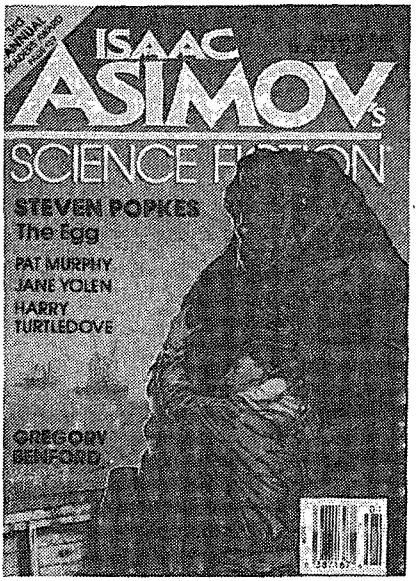

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"I wanted to save 'em, Leo, but I got voted down. We really couldn't afford a new predator in that area."

"Don't look so shocked, Noisy," Susan said. "You never know what might be useful some day. Just suppose we get an overpopulation of rabbits or something and we need a predator to balance them out before they eat all *our* crops. That's why Mama Jason wanted to keep them."

Leo looked unconvinced, Susan looked hurt suddenly. "Just because it's ugly, Leo," she said, "doesn't mean you wipe it out. There's nothing pretty about a rock lobster but it sure as hell tastes good."

"I grant you that. I'm just not as sure about things that think *I* taste good."

Susan folded her arms across her chest and heaved another of those dramatic sighs. "Now I know what you're up against, Mama Jason," she said. "Pure ignorance."

That surprised me. I held my tongue for once, waiting to see how Leo would take that.

"Nothing pure about it," he said. "Don't insult a man who's trying to enlighten himself. That never furthered a cause." He paused, then added, "You sound like you take it very personally."

Susan dropped her eyes. There was something in that evasion that wasn't simple embarrassment at overstepping good manners. When she looked up again, she said, "I'm sorry, Leo. I just get so *mad* sometimes. Mama Jason—"

This time I had to come to her rescue. "Mama Jason sets a bad example, Leo. I come up here and rave about the rampant stupidity everywhere else. Susan, better to educate people than insult them. If I say insulting things about them when I'm in family that's one thing. But I would never say to somebody who was concerned about his kids or his crops what you just said to Leo."

"Yeah. I know. I'm sorry again."

"Forgiven," said Leo. "Better you make your mistakes on me and learn from them than make 'em on somebody else who might wallop you and turn you stubborn."

Susan brightened. "Oh, but I *am* stubborn, Leo! You always say so!"

"Stubborn, yes. *Stupid* stubborn—not that I've seen."

Again there was something other than embarrassment in her dropped eyes. I tried to puzzle it out, but I was distracted by a noise in the distance.

It came from the direction of the loch—something faint and unfamiliar. I cocked my head to listen harder and got an earful of sneezes instead.

"S-sorry!" Susan gasped, through a second series of sneezes. "P-pollen!" Then she was off again, her face buried in a napkin.

Leo caught my eye. He thought the sneezing fit was as phony as I did.

"Well," I said, "you may be allergic to the pollen—" she wasn't, I knew

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very well "—but I came hoping I'd timed it right to see Loch Moose smoke. And to get in some contemplative fishing—" meaning I didn't intend to bait my hook "—before it gets too dark."

Susan held up her hand, finished off one last sequence of sneezes, then said, "What about your nap?"

"What do you think contemplative fishing *is*?"

"Oh. Right. Get Leo to take you, then. He knows all the best places."

"I'd be honored," Leo said.

We left Susan scrubbing her face. Pausing only to pick up poles in the hallway, we set off in silence along the footpath down to Loch Moose. When we got to the first parting of the path, I broke the silence. "Which way to your favorite spot?"

He pointed to the right fork. I'd figured as much. "Mine's to the left," I said and headed out that way. If Susan didn't want me in my usual haunts, I wanted to know why. Leo followed without comment, so I knew he was thinking the same thing.

"Keep your ears open. I heard something before Susan started her 'sneezing fit' to cover it."

We came to another parting in the path. I angled right and again he followed. Pretty soon we were skidding and picking our way down the incline that led to the otters' playground.

When we got to surer footing, Leo paused. "Annie—now that I've got somebody to ask: will you satisfy my curiosity?"

That piqued mine. "About what?"

"*Was* there such a thing as the Loch Ness Monster? I always thought my mother had made it up."

I laughed. "And I thought my granddaddy had, especially since he claimed that people came to Loch Ness from all over the Earth hoping to catch a glimpse of the monster! I looked it up once in ship's records. There really *was* such a place and people really did come from everywhere for a look!"

He was as taken aback about that as I'd been, then he heard what I hadn't said. "And the monster—was *it* real? Did it look like any of the stories?"

"I never found out."

"Pre-photograph?"

"No," I said, "that was the odd thing about it. There were some fuzzy photos—old flat ones, from a period when *everybody* had photographic equipment—that might have been photos of anything. The story was that Nessie was very shy and the loch was too full of peat to get sonograms. Lots of excuses, no results."

"Smoking too much weed, eh?"

"Lot of that going around," I said. "But no, I suspect Nessie was exactly

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what granddad used her for—a story. What's always fascinated me is that people went to *look!*"

Quite unexpectedly, Leo chuckled. "You underestimate the average curiosity. I don't think you appreciate how many people stayed glued to their TVs while you folks rounded up those kangaroos rexes. A little thrill is high entertainment."

"The hell it is," I said indignantly. "I oughta know: I do it for a living. *They* didn't get their boots chewed off by the damn things."

"Exactly my point," said Leo. "Scary but safe. Elly's kids would be the first to tell you what a good combination that is. They watch their kangaroo rex tape about twice a week, and cheer for you every time."

Some things I was better off not knowing, I thought. I sighed. Turning away from Leo, I got the full view of Loch Moose and its surroundings, which drew a second sigh—this time pure content.

The secret of its appeal was that despite the vast sparkle of sunlight that glittered off it, Loch Moose always felt hidden away—a place you and you alone were aware of.

It took me a while to remember that Leo was beside me. No, I take that back. I was aware that he was there all along, but he was as content as I to simply drink it all in without a word.

Sometime—when we were both done admiring the scene—we headed for the boats, by some sort of mutual agreement. I was liking Leo more and more. For another thing, the whistling of the otters made him smile.

The slope down to the boats was dotted with violets. Most of them were that almost fiery shade of blue that practically defines the species, but once in a while they came out white just for the surprise of it. Some were more surprising than white, though. Almost hidden in the deep shade was a small isolated patch of scarlet.

For the life of me, I couldn't remember seeing any material on scarlet violets. I stooped for a closer look. Damned odd texture to the petals, too, like velvet.

"Pretty, aren't they?" Leo said. "Stop by my place while you're here, and I'll show you half an acre of them."

I stood up to look him in the eye. "Popped up all at once? First time, this year?"

"No. I've been putting them in when I found them for, oh, three years now."

"Oh, Leo. Half of Mirabile thinks everything's going to sprout fangs and bite them and the other half doesn't even take elementary precautions. Never *ever* transplant something red unless somebody's done a work-up on it first!"

He looked startled. "Are they dangerous?"

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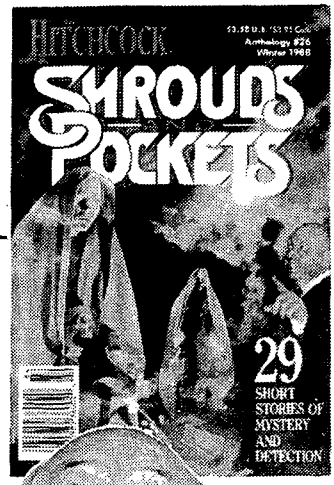

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"Don't *you* start!" Dammit, I'd done it—jumped on him with both feet. "Sorry. I'm still fuming over those red daffodils, I guess."

"Annie, I'm too damned old to worry about everything that flowers red. I took them for what my grandmother called 'pansies.' Much to her disappointment, she never could get any started on Mirabile. Maybe they aren't, but that's how I think of them. I'm going to hate it if you tell me I have to pull 'em out because they're about to seed mosquitoes."

And he'd never forgive me either, I could tell.

"We'll get a sample on the way back, Leo. If there's a problem, I'll see if I can stabilize them for you." He looked so surprised, I had to add, "Practical is not my only consideration. Never has been. 'Pretty' is just fine, provided I've got the time to spare."

That satisfied him. He smiled all the way down to the edge of the water.

Two hands made light work of launching a boat and we paddled across to a sheltered cove I had always favored. I tied the boat to a low branch that overhung the water, dropped a naked hook into the loch, and leaned back. Leo did the same.

What I liked best about this spot, I think, was that it was the perfect view of the otters' playground—without disturbing the play. It also meant I didn't have to bring along treats for the little beggars. Susan had been feeding them since she was—oh—Jen's age. They'd grown so used to it that they hustled the tourists now.

I didn't believe in it myself, but as long as she didn't overdo it to the point they couldn't fend for themselves I wasn't about to make a fuss. I think Susan knew that too. She had a better grasp of the principles than most adults I knew, aside from those on the team, of course.

The hillside and water were alive with the antics of the otters. Some rippled snake-like through the water. One chased one of those king-sized dragonflies. Two others tussled on the ridge and eventually threw themselves down the incline, tumbling over and over each other, to hit the water with a splash.

Leo touched my arm and pointed a little to the side. He was frowning. I turned to take it in and discovered there was an altercation going on, just below the surface of the water. This one was of a more serious nature.

"Odd," I said, speaking aloud for the first time since we'd settled in. He nodded, and we both kept watching, but there wasn't anything to see except the occasional flick of a long muscular tail, the wild splash of water. A squeal of anger was followed by a squeal of distress and the combatants broke off, one of them high-tailing it towards us.

I got only a glimpse as it passed us by but it seemed to me it was considerably bigger than its opponent. Biggest otter I'd seen, in fact. I wondered why it had run instead of the smaller one.

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The smaller one was already back at play. Leo shrugged and grinned. "I thought mating season was over," he said. "So did she, considering how she treated him."

"Ah," I said, "I missed the opening moves."

We settled back again, nothing to perturb us but the otter follies, which brought us to laughter over and over again. We trusted nothing would interrupt that by tugging at our lines.

Shadow was beginning to lengthen across us. I knew we had another half hour before it would be too dark for us to make our way easily back up to the lodge. "Leo," I said, "want me to head in? Your way will be in shadows long before mine."

"Staying the night at the lodge. I promised Elly I'd do some handiwork for her. Besides, I could do with another of Chris's meals."

There was a stir and a series of splashes to our right, deep in the cove. That large otter, back with friends. There were two troops of them in the loch now. I made a mental note to make sure they weren't overfishing the shrimp or the trout, then I made a second note to see if we couldn't spread the otters to another lake as well. The otters were pretty firmly established on Mirabile but it never hurt to start up another colony elsewhere.

I turned to get a better look, maybe count noses to get a rough estimate of numbers. I counted six, eight, nine separate ripples in the water. Something seemed a little off about them. I got a firm clamp on my suspicious mind and on the stories I'd heard all day and tried to take an unbiased look. They weren't about to hold still long enough for me to get a fix on them through the branches and the shadows that were deepening by the moment.

One twined around an overhang. I could see the characteristic tail but its head was lost in a stand of waterlilies. Good fishing there, I knew. The trout always thought they could hide in the waterlilies and the otters always knew just where to find them. Then I realized with a start that the waterlilies were disappearing.

I frowned. I untied the boat and gestured for Leo to help me get closer. We grabbed at branches to pull the boat along as silently as possible. To no avail: with a sudden flurry of splashes all around, the otters were gone.

"Hell," I said. I unshipped the oars and we continued on over. I was losing too much of the light. I thrust down into the icy water and felt around the stand of lilies, then I grabbed and yanked, splattering water all over Leo. He made not a word of complaint. Instead, he stuck a damp match into his shirt pocket and tried a second one. This one lit.

It told my eyes what my fingers had already learned: the water lily had been neatly chewed. Several other leaves had been nipped off the

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stems as well—but at an earlier time, to judge from the way the stem had sealed itself. I dropped the plant back in the water and wiped my hands dry on my slacks.

Leo drowned the match and stuck it in his pocket with the first. It got suddenly very dark and very quiet on the loch.

I decided I didn't want either of us out here without some kind of protective gear. I reached for the overhang and shoved us back toward the sunlit side of the loch. It wasn't until I'd unshipped my oar again that I got my second shock of the day.

That branch was the one I'd seen the otter twined around. That gave me a belated sense of scale. The "otter" had been a good eight feet long!

I chewed on the thought all the way back to the lodge. Would have forgotten the violets altogether but for Leo's refusal to let that happen. I put my pole back in its place and took the scarlet violet and its clump of earth from him. Spotted Susan and said, "Leo wants to see a gene-read. Can you have Chris send rock lobster for two up to my room?"

"It's on its way, Mama." She paused to glance at the violets. "Pretty," she said, "I hope—"

"Yeah, me too."

"Hey!" she said suddenly, "I thought you were here for a break?"

"How else can I lure Leo up to my room?"

"You could just invite him, Mama Jason. That's what you're always telling us: Keep it simple and straightforward. . . ."

"I should keep my mouth shut."

"Then you wouldn't be able to eat your lobster." With that as her parting shot, Susan vanished back into the dining room. I paused to poke my head around the corner—empty, just as before.

We climbed the stairs. I motioned Leo in, laid down the clump of violets and opened my gear. "Violets first," I said, "as long as we're about to be interrupted."

I took my sample and cued up the room computer, linked it to the one back at the lab. There was a message from Mike waiting. "The daffodils have perked up, so they look good," it said, "and the troops have returned from the Guernsey wars triumphant. We'll call if we need you. You do the same."

"You forgot to say how your hand is, dummy," I growled at the screen—then typed the same in, for him to find in the morning.

The first level gene-read on the violets went fast. All it takes is a decent microscope—that I carry—and the computer. The hard part was running it through ship's records looking for a match or a near match. I could let that run all night while I slept through it.

Susan brought the rock lobster and peered over my shoulder as she

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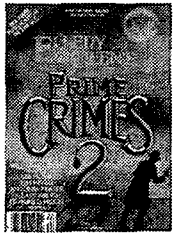

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set it down. "Mama Jason, I can keep an eye on that while you eat if you like."

"Sure," I said, getting up to give her the chair. Leo and I dug into our lobster, with an occasional glance at the monitor. "Watch this part, Leo," I said. Susan had already finished the preliminary and was looking for any tacked on genes that might be readable.

Susan's fingers danced, then she peered at the screen like she was trying to see through it. Mike gets that same look. I suppose I do, too. The screen looks right through the "whatsis"—as Susan would say—and into its genetic makeup. "Mama Jason, I can't see anything but the primary helix."

"Okay." Neither did I. "Try a match with violets." To Leo, I added, "We might as well try the easy stuff first. Why run the all-night program if you don't have to?" I ducked into the bathroom to wash rock lobster and butter off my fingers.

"No luck," Susan called to me.

When I came out, Leo had disappointment written all over his face. "Buck up," I said. "We're not giving up that easily. Susan, ask the computer if it's got a pattern for something called a 'pansy' or a 'pansies.' "

" 'Pansy,' " said Leo and he spelled it for her.

It did. Luckily, that wasn't one of the areas we'd lost data in. "Oh, Mama Jason!" said Susan. "Will you look at *that?*"

We had a match.

"Leo, you lucky dog!" I said. "Your grandma would be proud of you!"

His jaw dropped. "You mean—they really *are* pansies?"

"Dead on," I told him, while Susan grinned like crazy. I patted her on the shoulder—and gave her a bit of a nudge toward the door at the same time. "You bring Susan a sample of the ones you planted around your place, just so she can double-check for stability. But I think you've got exactly what you hoped you had."

I pointed to the left side of the screen. "According to this, they should come in just about every color of the rainbow. We may have to goose them a bit for that—unless you prefer them all red?"

"Authentic," said Leo, "I want them Earth authentic, as long as you're asking *me*."

"Okay. Tomorrow then," I told Susan. She grinned once more and left.

I sat down at the computer again. Wrote the stuff on the pansy to local memory—then I cleared the screen and called up everything ship's records had on otters.

They didn't eat waterlilies and they didn't come eight feet long. Pointing to the genes in question, I told Leo this.

"Does that mean there *is* a monster in the lake?"

"I can't tell you that. I'm not terribly concerned about something that

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eats waterlilies, Leo, but I do want to know if it's chaining up to something else."

"How do we find out?"

"*I* snag a cell sample from the beasties."

Again his lips pressed together in that wry way. "May I offer you what assistance I can?" A sweeping spread of the hands. "I'm very good at keeping out of the way and at following orders. I'm also a first-rate shot with a rifle and I can tell the difference between a monstrosity and a monster. I promise no shooting unless it's absolutely necessary."

"Let me think on it, Leo." Mostly I wanted to ask Elly if what he said was true.

He must have read my mind, because he smiled and said, "Elly will vouch for me. I'll see you in the morning."

That was all. Except maybe I should mention he kissed my hand on his way out. I was beginning to like Leo more and more.

After he left, I did some thinking on it, then I trotted downstairs to talk to Elly. I leaned against the countertop, careful not to get in the way of her cleaning, and said, "Tell me about Leo."

Elly stopped scrubbing for a moment, looked up, and smiled. "Like you," she said.

"That good or bad?"

The smile broadened into a grin. "Both. That means he's stubborn, loyal, keeps a secret *secret,* plays gruff with the kids but adores them just the same."

"Any permanent attachments?" It popped out before I knew it was coming. I tried to shove it back in, but Elly only laughed harder at my attempt.

"Why, Annie! I believe you've got a crush on Leo!" Still laughing, she pulled out a chair and sat beside me, cupping her chin in her hand. "I shouldn't be surprised. All the kids do."

I gave one of Susan's patented sighs.

"Okay, okay," she said, "I'll leave off. I like it, though. I like Leo and I like you and I think you'd get along together just fine."

"Is he as good a shot as he claims to be? And as judicious about it?"

That sat her upright and looking wary.

"No panic," I said firmly. "You *have* got something in the loch that I want a look at—but it's an herbivore and I doubt it's dangerous. It's big enough to overturn a boat maybe, but—"

"Are you calling in the team?"

"I don't think that's necessary. They could all do with a break—"

"That's what *you* came for. That's hardly fair."

I waved that aside. "Elly, you should know me better by now. I wouldn't have taken this up as a profession if I weren't a born meddler. And I

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asked about Leo because he offered to give me a hand." I know I scowled. "Money and equipment I can always get—it's the hands we're short."

"You're going to make off with half my kids one of these days."

I couldn't help it. I jerked around to stare at her. She was smiling—and that laugh was threatening to break out all over again. "Annie, surely it's occurred to you that half those kids want to be just like you when they grow up!"

"But—!"

"Oh, dear. Poor Mama Jason. You thought I was raising a whole passel of little Ellies here, didn't you?"

The thing was, I'd never given it any thought at all. More than likely I just assumed Susan and Chris and Ilanith would take over the lodge and . . .

Elly patted my hand. "Don't you worry. Chris will run the lodge and you and the rest can still drop by for vacations."

I felt guilty as hell somehow, as if I'd subverted the whole family.

Elly gave me a big hug. "Wipe that look off your face. You'd think I got chimerae instead of proper kids! The only thing I ask is that you don't cart them off until you're sure they're ready."

"You'll worry yourself sick!"

"No. I'll worry the same way I worry about *you*. Do I look sick?"

She stood off and let me look. She looked about as good as anybody could. She knew it, too. Just grinned again and said, "Take Leo with you. Susan, too, if you think she's ready. I warn you, *she* thinks she is, but she'll listen to you on the subject."

And that was the end of it as far as Elly was concerned. I walked back to my room, thoughtful all the way.

Damnify knew how I could have missed it. And there I'd been aggravating the situation as well, calling Susan "my assistant," letting her do the gene-read on Leo's pansies. Then I thought about it some more.

She'd done a damn fine gene-read. If she'd heard Leo talk about the pansies, she'd have no doubt thought to try that second as well.

The more I thought, the more I saw Elly was right. It was just so unexpected that I'd never really looked at it.

I crawled into that comfortable bed and lay there listening to the night sounds off the loch and all the while I was wondering how soon I could put Susan to work. I drifted off into sleep and my dreams were more pleased by it all than I would have admitted to Elly.

I woke, not rested enough, to an insistent shaking of my shoulder and opened my eyes to see a goggle-eyed something inches from my face. Thinking the dream had turned bad, I mumbled at it to go away and rolled over.

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"Please, Mama Jason," the bad dream said. "Please, I *gotta* talk to you. I can't tell Elly, and I'm afraid it's gonna hurt her."

Well, when a bad dream starts threatening Elly, I listen. I sat up and discovered that the bad dream was only Jen, the nine-year-old. "Gimme half a chance, Jen," I said, holding up one hand while I smeared my face around with the other, trying to stretch my eyes into focus so I could see my watch. My watch told me I'd had enough sleep to function rationally, so I levered myself up.

Jen's eyes unpopped, squinched up, and started leaking enormous teardrops. She made a dash for the door, but by then I was awake and I caught her before she made her exit. "Hold on," I said. "You don't just tell me something's out to hurt Elly and then disappear. Ain't done."

Still leaking tears, she wailed, "It's supposed to be a *secret*. . . ."

Which she wanted somebody to force out of her. Okay, I could oblige, and she could tell the rest Mama Jason *made* her tell. I plopped her firmly on the edge of the bed. "Now wipe your nose and tell me what this is about. You'd think *I* was the chimera the way you're acting."

"You gotta promise not to hurt Monster. He's Susan's."

I did nothing of the sort. I waited and she went on, "I didn't know he was so *big,* Mama Jason!" She threw out those two skinny arms to show me just *how* big, which actually made it about three feet long tops, but I knew from the fingertip to fingertip glance that went with the arm fling that she meant *much* bigger. "Now I'm scared for Susan!"

"What do you mean, he's *Susan's?*"

"Susan sneaks out at night to feed him. I never saw him, but he must be *awful.* She calls him Monster and he gurgles." She shivered.

I gathered her up and held her until the shivering stopped. Obviously all this had been going on for some time. She'd only broken silence because of Stirzaker's panicky report. "Okay," I said, still patting her, "I want you to let me know the next time Susan sneaks out to feed this Monster of hers—"

She blinked at me solemnly. "She's out there now, Mama Jason."

"Okay," I said. "Out there *where?*"

The bellow off the loch cut me short and brought me to my feet. Unlike Leo, I knew that hadn't been part of a dream. I was already headed for the window when the sound came again. I peered into the night.

Mirabile doesn't have a moon, but for the moment we've got a decent nova. Not enough radiation to worry about, just enough to see glimmers in the dark.

Something huge rippled through the waters of the loch. I stared harder, trying to make it come clear, but it wouldn't. It bellowed again, and an answering bellow came from the distant shore.

Whatever it was, it was *huge,* even bigger than the drifted otters I'd

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seen earlier. Had they chained up to something already? There was a splash and another bellow. I remember thinking Elly wouldn't hear it from her room; she was on the downside of the slope, cushioned from the loch noises by the earth of the slope itself.

Then I got a second glimpse of it, a huge head, a long body. With a shock, I realized that it looked like nothing so much as those blurry flat photos of "Nessie."

I turned to throw on some clothes and ran right into Jen, scaring her half to death. "Easy, easy. It's just me," I said, holding her by the shoulders. "Run get Leo—and tell him to bring his rifle." I gave her a push for the door and that kid moved like a house-afire.

So did Leo. By the time I'd got my gear together, double-checking the flare gun to make sure it had a healthy charge left, he was on my doorstep, rifle in hand.

We ran down the steps together, pausing only once—to ask Jen which way Susan had gone. Jen said, "Down to the loch, she calls it your favorite place! I thought you'd *know!*" She was on the verge of another wail.

"I know," I said. "Now you wait here. If we're not back in two hours, you wake Elly and tell her to get on the phone to Mike."

"Mike," she repeated, "Mike. Two hours." She plopped herself down on the floor directly opposite the clock. I knew I could count on her.

Leo and I switched on flashlights and started into the woods. I let him lead for the time being—he knew the paths better than I did and I wanted to move as fast as possible. We made no attempt to be quiet at it, either. In the dark and short-handed, I've always preferred scaring the creature off to facing it down.

We got to the boats in record time. Sure enough, one of them was gone. Leo and I pushed off and splashed across the loch, Leo rowing, me with the rifle in one hand and the flare gun in the other.

Nine times out of ten, the flare gun is enough to turn a Dragon's Tooth around and head it away from you. The rifle's there for that tenth time. Or in case it was threatening Susan.

A couple of large things rushed noisily through the woods to our far right. They might have been stag. They might not have been. Neither Leo nor I got a look at them.

"Duck," said Leo and I did and missed being clobbered by one of those overhanging branches by about a quarter of an inch. Turning, I made out the boat Susan had used. There was just enough proper shore there that we could beach ours beside it.

"All right, Susan," I said into the shadows. "Enough is enough. Come on out. At *my* age, I *need* my beauty sleep."

Leo snorted.

There was a quiet crackle behind him and Susan crawled out from the

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undergrowth looking sheepish. "I only wanted it to be a surprise," she said. She looked all around her and brightened. "It still is—you've scared them off!"

"When you're as old and cranky as I am, there's nothing you like *less* than a surprise," I said.

"Oh." She raked twigs out of her hair. "Then if I can get them to come out again, would you take your birthday present a month early?"

Leo and I glanced at each other. I knew we were both thinking about Jen, sitting in the hallway, worrying. "Two hours and not a minute more," Leo said.

"Okay, Susan. See if you can get 'em out. I'll want a cell sample, too." I rummaged through my gear for the snagger. Nice little gadget, that. Like an arrow on a string. Fire it off without a sound, it snaps at the critter with less than a fly sting (I know, I had Mike try it on me when he jury-rigged the first one), and you pull back the string with a sample on the end of it.

"Sit down then and be quiet."

We did. Susan ducked into the undergrowth a second time and came out with half a loaf of Chris's bread. She made the same chucking noise I'd heard her use to call her otters. She was expecting something low to the ground, I realized. Not the enormous thing I'd seen swimming in the loch.

I heard no more sounds from that direction, to my relief. I wish I could have thought I'd dreamed the entire thing but I knew I hadn't. What's worse, I picked that time to remember that one of the Nessie theories had made her out a displaced plesiosaur.

I was about to call a halt and get us all the hell out of there till daylight and a full team, when something stirred in the bushes. Susan chucked at it and held out a bit of bread.

It poked its nose into the circle of light from our flashes and blinked at us. It was the saddest-looking excuse for a creature I'd ever seen—the head was the shape of an old boot with jackass ears stuck on it.

"C'mon, Monster," Susan coaxed. "You know how much you love Chris's bread. Don't worry about them. They're noisy but they won't hurt you."

Sure enough, it humped its way out. It looked even worse when you saw the whole of it. What I'd thought was an otter wasn't. Oh, the body was otter, all six feet of it, but the head didn't go with the rest. After a moment's hesitation, it made an uncertain lowing noise, then snuffled at Susan, and took the piece of bread in its otter paws and crammed it down its mouth.

Then it bellowed, startling all three of us.

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"He just learned how to do that this year," Susan said, a pleased sort of admiration in her voice. The undergrowth around us stirred.

Out of the corner of my eye, I saw Leo level his rifle. Susan looked at him, worried. "He won't shoot unless something goes wrong, kiddo," I said as softly as I could and still be heard. "He promised me."

Susan nodded. "Okay, Monster. You can call them out then."

She needn't have said it. That bellow already had. There were maybe a dozen of them, all alike, all of them painfully ugly. No, that's the wrong way to put it—they were all *laughably* ugly.

The one she'd dubbed "Monster" edged closer to me. Nosy like the otters, too. It whuffled at my hand. Damn if that head wasn't purely herbivore. The teeth could give you a nasty nip from the looks of them, but it was deer family. The ugly branch of it anyhow.

A second one crawled into Leo's lap. It was trying to make off with his belt buckle. Susan chucked at it and bribed it away with bread. "She's such a thief. If you're not careful, she'll take anything that's shiny. Like the otters, really."

Yes, they were. The behavior was the same I'd seen from Susan's otters—but now I understood why the otters had chased one of these away this afternoon. They were recognizably *not* otters, even if they thought they *were*. Like humans, otters are very conservative about what they consider one of them.

Pretty soon the bread was gone. Monster hustled up the troops and headed them out, with one last look over his shoulder at us.

I popped him neatly with the snagger before Susan could raise a protest. He grunted and gnawed for a moment at his hip, the way a dog would for a flea, then he spotted the snagger moving away from him and pounced.

I had a tug of war on my hands. Susan got into the act and so did a handful of Monster's fellow monsters.

Leo laughed. It was enough to startle them away. I fell over and Susan landed on top of me. She was giggling, too, but she crawled over and got up, triumphant, with the sample in her hands.

"You didn't need it, Mama Jason," Susan said, "but I've decided to forgive you. Monster thought it was a good game." She giggled again and added impishly, "So did I."

"Fine," I said. "I hate to spoil the party, but it's time we got back to the lodge. We're all going to feel like hell in the morning."

Susan yawned. "I spose so. They lose interest pretty fast once I run out of bread."

"Susan, you row Leo back."

"You're not coming?" she said.

"Two boats," I pointed out. Susan was sleepy enough that she didn't

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ask why I wanted Leo in her boat. Leo blinked at me once, caught on, and climbed into the boat with his rifle across his knees.

By the time we reached the lodge, we were all pretty well knocked out. Jen gave us a big grin of relief to welcome us in. But two steps later we ran hard into Elly's scowl, not to mention Chris's, Ilanith's, and a half dozen others.

"I found Jen sitting in the hall watching the clock," Elly said. "She wouldn't go to bed and she wouldn't say why. Once I counted noses, I discovered the three of you were missing. So *you*—" that was me, of course "—owe me the explanation you wouldn't let her give me."

"There's something in the loch," I said. "We got a sample and I'll check it out tomorrow. Right now, we all need some sleep."

"Liar," said Chris. "Who's hungry? Midnight snacks—" she glanced at the clock and corrected "—whatever, food's waiting."

Everybody obligingly trooped into the kitchen, lured by the smell of chowder. I followed, knowing this meant I wasn't going to get off the hook without a full explanation. That meant no way of covering Susan's tracks.

We settled down and dived ravenously into the chowder. Chris poured a box of crackers into a serving tray. "There's no bread," she said with finality, eying Susan to let us all know who was responsible for this woeful state of affairs.

Susan squirmed. "Next time I'll take them crackers. They like your bread better, though."

"If you'd *asked*," Chris said, "I'd have made a couple of extra loaves."

"I wanted it to be a surprise for Mama Jason." She looked around the table. "You *know* how hard it is to think up a birthday present for her!" She pushed away from the table. "Wait! I'll be right back. I'll show you!"

I concentrated on the chowder. Birthday present, indeed! As if I needed some present other than the fact of those kids themselves. If Susan hadn't opened her mouth, Elly would've assumed I'd taken her along with us, as Elly'd suggested earlier. Glancing up, I saw Elly rest a sympathetic eye on me.

Well, I was off the hook, but Susan sure as hell wasn't.

There was a clamor of footsteps on the stairs and Susan was back with a huge box, full to over-spilling with papers and computer tapes. Chris shoved aside the pot of chowder to make space for them.

Susan pulled out her pocket computer and plugged it into the wall modem. "I did it right, Mama Jason. See if I didn't."

The photo album wasn't regulation but as the first page was a very pretty hologram (I recognized Ilanith's work) that spelled out "Happy Birthday, Mama Jason!" in imitation fireworks I could hardly complain. The second page was a holo of a mother otter and her pups. The pup in

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the foreground was deformed—the same way the creatures Susan had fed Chris's bread to were.

"That's Monster," Susan said, thrusting a finger at the holo. She peeled a strip of tape from beneath the holo and fed it to the computer. "That's his gene-read." She glanced at Chris. "I lured his mother away with bread to get the cell sample. The otters love your bread, too. I never used the fresh bread, Chris, only the stale stuff."

Chris nodded. "I know. I thought it was all going to the otters, though."

"More like 'odders,' " Leo put in, grinning. "Two *dees*."

Susan giggled. "I like that. Let's call 'em Odders, Mama Jason."

"Your critters," I said. "Naming it's your privilege."

"Odders is right." Chris peered over my shoulder and said to Susan, "Why were you feeding Dragon's Teeth?"

"He's so ugly, he's cute. The first ones got abandoned by their mothers. She—" Susan tapped the holo again "—decided to keep hers. Got ostracized for it, too, Mama Jason."

I nodded absently. That happened often enough. I was well into the gene-read Susan had done on her Monster. It was a good, thorough piece of work. I couldn't have done better myself.

Purely herbivorous—and among the things you could guarantee it'd eat were waterlilies and clogweed. That stopped me dead in my tracks. I looked up. "It eats clogweed!"

Susan dimpled. "It loves it! That's why it likes Chris's bread better than crackers."

"Why you—" Chris, utterly outraged, stood up so suddenly Elly had to catch at her bowl to keep from slopping chowder on everything.

I laughed. "Down, Chris! She's not insulting your bread! You use brandyflour in it—and brandyflour has almost the identical nutrients in it that clogweed has."

"You mean I could use clogweed to make my bread?" The idea appealed to Chris. She sat down again and looked at Susan with full attention.

"No, you can't," Susan said. "It's got a lot of things in it humans can't eat."

Leo said, "I'm not following again. Susan—?"

"Simple, Noisy. Clogweed's a major nuisance. Mostly it's taken care of by sheer heavy labor. Around Torville, everybody goes down to the canals and the irrigation ditches once a month or so and pulls the clogweed out by hand. When I saw Monster would eat clogweed, I figured he'd be worth keeping—if we could, that is."

"Not bad," said Ilanith. "I wondered why the intake valves had been so easy to clean lately." She leaned over to look at Monster's holo. "Two years old now, right?"

"Four," said Susan. "Only one wouldn't have made much difference.

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Mama Jason, I did a gene-read every year on them. Those're on the next pages. In case I missed something the first time."

I saw that. The whole EC was there, too, along with more holos and her search for matches with ship's records. There were no matches, so the thing was either a Dragon's Tooth or an intermediate. Just this year, she'd started a careful check for secondary and tertiary helices.

She saw how far I'd gotten in her records and said apologetically, "There's a secondary helix, but I didn't have a clue where to look for a match in ship's records, so I had to do it by brute force."

I handed her the sample I'd gotten from Monster little over a half hour ago. "Here, a fresh sample is always helpful."

She took it, then looked up at me wildly. "You mean me? You want me to keep working on it?"

"You want *me* to work on *my* birthday present?" I might just as well have given *her* a present, the way she lit up.

I yawned—it was that or laugh. "I'm going to bed. But nobody's to go down to the loch until Susan's done with her gene-read."

Elly frowned. "Annie? We've got to net tomorrow or Chris won't have anything to cook."

So there was no escaping it after all. "Take a holiday, Elly. There's something in the loch that isn't Susan's clogweed eaters. Leo and I will do a little looking around tomorrow—armed."

"Oh, Mama Jason!" Susan looked distraught. "You don't think Monster chained up to a *real* monster, do you?" Her eyes squinched up; she was close to tears.

"Hey!" I pulled her into a hug. For a moment I didn't know what else to say, then I remembered the first time Mike had gotten a nasty alternative instead of what he wanted. "I'll tell you just what I've said to Mike: sometimes you have to risk the bad to get the good."

I pushed her a bit away to see if that had worked. Not really. "Listen, honey, do you know how Mike and I planned to spend our winter vacation this year?"

When she shook her head I knew I had her attention, no matter how distressed. I told her: "Cobbling together something that would eat clogweed. If all we have to do is stabilize your monsters, you've saved us years of work!"

I pulled her to for another hug. "Best birthday present I've had in years!"

That, finally, brought a smile from her. It was a little wan, but it was there.

"So here's the game plan. You load the sample tonight while it's fresh, then get a good night's sleep and do the gene-read tomorrow while *you're*

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fresh. Leo and I will do a little tracking as soon as it's light enough. Everybody else gets to sleep late."

That did nothing to take the worry out of Elly's or Chris's eyes but I could see they'd both go along with it, though they were still concerned somebody might decide the kids should be evacuated. "Elly," I said, "we'll work something out, I promise."

That eased the tension in her eyes somewhat, even though I hadn't the vaguest idea *what* we'd work out. Still, a good night's sleep—even a short one—was always guaranteed to help. With a few more hugs, I stumbled off to bed.

Morning came the way it usually did for me this time of year—much too early. Leo, bless him, was up but quiet. The first thing I wanted was a good look at the otters' playground. That was near enough to where I'd seen the creature that maybe we could find some tracks. This side of Loch Moose got its sunlight early, if at all. Luckily, the day was a good one and the scenery was enough to make you glad you had eyes and ears and a nose.

I stood for a moment trying to orient myself, then pointed. "Somewhere around here. I'm pretty sure that's where I heard it." We separated.

Something that big should have left visible evidence of its passing. The popcorn tree was my first break. Something had eaten all the lower leaves from it and done some desultory gnawing at its bark into the bargain. That was several days earlier, from the look of the wood, so I didn't find any tracks to go with it.

Now, the popcorn tree's native to Mirabile, so we were dealing with a creature that either didn't have long to live or was a Dragon's Tooth suited to the EC. Still, it was an herbivore, unless it was one of those exceptions that nibbled trees for some reason other than nourishment.

But it was *big!* I might have discounted the height it could reach as something that stood on its hind feet and stretched, but this matched the glimpse I'd gotten by novalight.

Leo called and I went to see what he'd found. When I caught up with him, he was staring at the ground. "Annie, this thing weighs a ton!" He pointed.

Hoofprints sunk deep into the damp ground. He meant "ton" in the literal sense. I stooped for a closer look, then unshipped my backpack and got out my gear. "Get me a little water, will you, Leo?" I handed him a folded container. "I want to make a plaster cast. Hey!" I added as an afterthought. "Keep your eyes open!"

He grinned. "Hard to miss something that size."

"You have up to now," I pointed out. I wasn't being snide, just realistic. I'm happy to say he understood me.

I went back to examining the print. It was definitely not deer, though

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it looked related. The red deer survived by sticking to a strict diet of Earth authentic, which meant I couldn't draw any real conclusions from the similarities. I was still betting herbivore, though maybe it was just because I was hoping.

I was purely tired of things that bit or mangled or otherwise made my life miserable. Seemed to me it was about time the Dragon's Teeth started to balance out and produce something useful.

By the time we mixed the plaster and slopped it into the print, I'd decided that I should be grateful for Susan's clogweed-eaters and Leo's pansies and not expect too much of our huge surprise package.

"Leo, I think it's an herbivore. That doesn't mean it isn't dangerous—you know what a bull can do—but it means I don't want it shot on sight."

"You wouldn't want it shot on sight if it *were* a carnivore," he said. "If I didn't shoot the first beastly on sight, I'm not likely to shoot *this* without good reason."

I fixed him with a look of pure disgust. The disgust was aimed at me, though. I knew the name Leonov Denness should have rung bells but I'd gotten distracted by the nickname.

Back when he was Leonov *Opener* Denness, he'd been the scout that opened and mapped all the new territory from Ranomafana to Goddamn! He brought back cell samples of everything he found, that being part of the job; but he'd also brought back a live specimen of the beastly, which was at least as nasty as the average kangaroo rex and could fly to boot. When Granddaddy Jason asked him why he'd gone to the trouble, he'd only shrugged and said, "Best you observe its habits as well as its genes."

The decision on the beastly had been to push it back from the inhabited areas rather than to shoot on sight. Nasty as it was, it could be driven off by loud sounds (bronze bells, now that I thought of it!) and it made a specialty of hunting what passed for rats on Mirabile. Those rats were considerably worse than having to yell yourself hoarse when you traveled through the plains farmlands.

"If you'd jogged my memory earlier," I said, "I wouldn't have bothered to check your credentials with Elly."

"Annie, I didn't think bragging was in order."

"Facts are a little different than brags. Now I can stop worrying about your health and get down to serious business."

Leaving the plaster to harden, I headed him down to the boats. "Two boats today, Leonov Opener Denness. You stake out that side of the loch, I'll stake out this. Much as I'd enjoy your company, this gives us two chances to spot something and the sooner we get this sorted out, the better it'll be for Elly. Whistle if you spot anything. Otherwise, I'll meet you back here an hour after dusk."

We'd probably have to do a nighttime wait, too, but I was hoping the

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thing wasn't strictly nocturnal. If it was, I'd need more equipment, which meant calling Mike, which meant making it formal and public.

There's nothing more irritating than waiting for a Dragon's Tooth to rear its ugly head, even if you're sure the head's herbivorous. After all these years, I'm pretty good at it. Besides, there were otters and odders to watch and it was one of those perfect days on Loch Moose. I'd have been out contemplative fishing anyhow. This just took its toll of watching and waiting, which is not nearly as restful. Somewhere in the back of my mind, the plesiosaur still swam sinisterly in Loch Ness.

Susan's odders, as ugly as they were, proved in action almost as much fun as the otters, though considerably sillier-looking. And observation proved her right—several times I saw them dive down and come up with a mouthful of lilies or clogweed.

A breeze came up—one of those lovely ones that Loch Moose is justly famous for—soft and sweet and smelling of lilies and pine and popcorn tree.

The pines began to smoke. I found myself grateful to the Dragon's Tooth for putting me on the loch at the right time to see it.

The whole loch misted over with drifting golden clouds of pollen. I could scarcely see my hand in front of my face. That, of course, was when I heard it. First a soft thud of hooves, then something easing into the water. Something big. I strained to see, but the golden mist made it impossible.

I was damned glad Leo had told me his past history, otherwise I'd have worried. I knew he was doing exactly what I was doing at that moment—keeping dead silent and listening. I brought up my flare gun in one hand and my snagger in the other. Even if it was a plesiosaur, a flare right in the face should drive it off. I couldn't bring myself to raise the rifle. Must be I'm mellowing in my old age.

I could still hear the splash and play of the otters and the odders on either side of me. That was a good sign as well. They'd decided it wasn't a hazard to them.

My nerves were singing, though, as I heard the soft splashing coming toward me. I turned toward the sound, but still couldn't see a thing. There was a gurgle, like water being sucked down a drain, and suddenly I couldn't locate it by ear anymore. I guessed it had submerged, but that didn't do a thing for my nerves. . . .

The best I could do was keep an eye on the surface of the water where it should have been heading if it had followed a straight line—and that was directly under my boat. Looking straight down, I could barely make out a dark bulk. I could believe the ton estimate.

It reached the other side. I lost sight of it momentarily. Then, with a

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surge that brought up an entire float of lilies and splattered water all over me, it surfaced not ten feet from my boat, to eye me with a glare.

I'd thought Susan's odders were as ugly as things came, but this topped them without even trying. Even through the mist, I could see it now.

Like Susan's Monster, it had that same old-boot-shaped head, the same flopping mule ears, streaming water now. What I'd taken for its head in the glimpse I'd gotten the previous night was actually the most unbelievable set of antlers I'd ever seen in my life, like huge gnarled up-raised palms. What Stirzaker had taken for grasping hands, I realized—only at the moment they were filled to the brim with a tangle of scarlet waterlilies. From its throat, a flap of flesh dangled dripping like a wet beard. It stared at me with solemn black eyes and munched thoughtfully on the nearest of the dangling lilies. The drifting pollen was slowly turning it to gold.

I swear I didn't know whether to laugh or to cry.

For a moment, I just stared, and it stared back, looking away only long enough to tilt another lily into its mouth. Then I remembered what I was there for and raised the snagger. I got it first try, snapped the snagger to retrieve.

The thing jerked back, glared, then let out a bellow that Mike must have heard back in the lab. It started to swim closer.

"BACK OFF!" I bellowed. Truthfully, I didn't think it was angered, just nosy, but I didn't want to find out the hard way. I raised the flare gun.

From the distance came the sound of splashing oars. "Annie!" Leo yelled, "I'm coming. Hang on!"

The creature backpedaled in the water and cocked its head, lilies and all, toward the sound of Leo's boat. Interested all over again, it started that way at a very efficient paddle. I got a glimpse of a hump just at the shoulders, followed by the curve of a rump, followed by a tiny flop of tail like a deer's. The same view Pastides had gotten, no doubt.

Suddenly, from the direction of Leo's boat there came the clamor of a bell. The creature back-pedaled again, ears twitching.

With a splash of utter panic, the creature turned around in the water, dived for cover, and swam for shore. I could hear it crash into the undergrowth even over the clanging of the bell.

"Enough, Leo, enough! It's gone!" He shut up with the bell and we called to each other until he found me through the mist. I'm sorry to say by the time he pulled alongside, I was laughing so hard there were tears streaming down my cheeks.

Leo's face—what I could see of it—went through about three changes of expression in as many seconds. He laid aside his bell—it was a big

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bronze beastly-scarebell—and sighed with relief. He too was gold from all the pollen.

I wiped my eyes and grinned at him. "I wish I could say, 'Saved by the bell,' but the thing wasn't really a danger. Clumsy maybe. Possibly aggressive if annoyed, but—" I burst into laughter again.

Leo said amiably, "I'm sure you'll tell me about it when you get your breath back."

I nodded. Pulling in the sample the snagger had caught, I waved him toward the shore. When we were halfway up the hill to the lodge, I said, "Please, Leo, don't ask until I can check my sample."

He spread his hands. "At least I know it's not a plesiosaur."

I had the urge again—and found the laughter had worn down to hiccupping giggles.

When we got to the lodge, I didn't have to yell for them—we got surrounded the moment we hit the porch. Elly did a full-body check on both of us, which meant she wound up as pollen-covered as we were.

"Susan," I said through the chaos of a dozen questions at once, "run that for me. Let's see what we've got." I held out the sample.

"Me?" Susan squeaked.

"You," I said. I took Leo's arm, well above the rifle, and said, "We want some eats, and then I want to see Susan's results from this morning."

I cued the computer over a bowl of steaming chowder, calling up the odder sample Susan had been working on. She'd found some stuff in the twists all right.

All the possibilities were herbivorous though—and I was betting that one of them would match my silly-looking friend in the loch. I giggled again, I'm afraid. I had a pretty good idea what we were dealing with, but I had to be *sure* before I let those kids back out on the loch.

By the time we'd finished our chowder, Susan had come charging down the stairs. She punched up the results on my monitor—she was not just fast, she was *good*.

I called up ship's records and went straight to my best guess. At a glance, we had a match but I went through gene by gene and found the one drift.

"It's a match!" Ilanith crowed from behind me. "First try, too, Mama Jason!"

Everybody focused on the monitor. "Look again, kiddo. Only ninety-nine percent match." I pointed out the drifted genes. "Those mean it can eat your popcorn trees without so much as a stomach upset."

Ilanith said, "That's okay with me. Elly? Do you mind?"

"I don't know," Elly said. "What *is* it, Annie? Can we live with it?"

I called up ship's records on the behavior patterns of the authentic creature and moved aside to let Elly have a look. "I suspect you'll all

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have to carry Leo's secret weapon when you go down to the loch to fish or swim, but other than that I don't see much of a problem."

Leo thumped me on the back. "Damn you, woman, what *is* it?"

Elly'd gotten a film that might have been my creature's twin. She looked taken aback at first, then she too giggled. "That's the silliest thing I've seen in years! Come on, Annie, *what is it?*"

"Honey, Loch Moose has got its first moose."

"No!" Leo shouted—but he followed it with a laugh as he crowded in with the rest to look at the screen.

Only Susan wasn't laughing. She caught my hand and pulled me down to whisper, "Will they let us keep it if it's only ninety-nine percent? It's not *good* for anything, like the odders are."

I patted her hand. "It's good for a laugh. I say it's a keeper." I was not about to let this go the way of the kangaroo rex.

"Now I understand why I found her in that state," Leo was saying. He pointed accusingly at me. "This woman was laughing so hard she could scarcely catch her breath."

"You didn't see the damn thing crowned with waterlilies and chewing on them while it contemplated the oddity in the boat. You'd have been as helpless as I was."

"Unbelievable," he said.

"Worse," I told him, "in this case, seeing isn't believing. I still can't believe in something like *that*. The mind won't encompass it."

He laughed at the screen, then again at me. "Maybe that accounts for your granddaddy's monster. It was so silly-looking anybody who saw it wouldn't believe his own eyes."

I couldn't help it—I kissed him on the cheek. "Leo, you're a genius!"

He squeaked like Susan. "Me? What did *I* do?"

"Elly," I said, "congratulations! You now have the only lodge on Mirabile with an *Earth authentic* Loch Ness monster." I grinned at Susan, who caught on immediately. I swear her smile started at the mouth and ran all the way down to her toes.

Feeling rather smug, I went on, "Leo will make bells so your lodgers can scare it away if it gets too close to them, won't you, Leo?"

"Oh!" said Leo. He considered the idea. "You know, Annie, it might just work. If everybody went to Loch Ness to try to get a glimpse of the monster, maybe they'll come *here,* too. Scary but safe."

"Exactly." I fixed him with a look. "Now how do we go about it?"

He grinned. "We follow our family traditions: we tell stories."

"You think if I hang around for a week or so that'll make it a safe monster?"

"Yeah, I think so."

"Good," I said. "Susan? What's the verdict? Are you going off to the

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lab? If I'm going to stay here, *somebody*'ll have to help Mike coddle those red daffodils."

No squeak this time. Her mouth dropped open but what came out was, "Uh, yes. Uh, Elly?"

Elly nodded with a smile, sad but proud all in one.

So while they bustled about packing, I had a chance to read through all the material in ship's records on both moose and Nessie. By the time they were ready to leave for town, I had a pretty good idea of our game plan. I sent Susan off with instructions to run a full gene-read on both creatures. Brute force on the moose, to make sure it wouldn't chain up to something bigger and nastier.

Then we co-opted the rest of Elly's kids. Leo gave each of them a different version of our monster tale to tell.

Jen, I thought, did it best. She got so excited when she told it that her eyes popped and she got incoherent, greatly enhancing the tale of how Leonov Opener Denness had saved Annie Jason Masmajean from the monster in Loch Moose.

Leo brought bells from his workshop. They'd been intended to keep beastlies away in the northern territory but there was no reason they wouldn't do just as good a job against a monster that was Earth authentic.

Two days later, the inn was full of over-nighters—much to Elly's surprise and delight—all hoping for a glimpse of the Loch Moose monster.

In my room, late night and by novalight, Leo got his first peek at the creature. Once again it was swimming in the loch. He stared long and hard out the window. After a long moment, he remembered the task we'd set ourselves. "Should I wake the rest of the lodgers, do you think?"

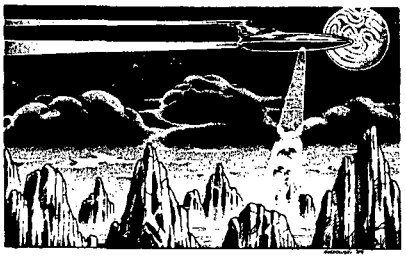
"No," I said, "you just tell them about it at breakfast. Anybody who doesn't see it tonight will stay another night, hoping."

"You're a wicked old lady."

I raised Ilanith's camera to the window. "Yup," I said, and, twisting the lens deliberately out of focus, I snapped a picture.

"Hope that didn't come out well," I said. ●

—for Chip and Beth



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DOWN FLASHING

the dead weight of history,
the decaying stash of centuries past
over ripening on every side,
I descend in a conceptualized
temporal bathysphere, transparent,
to shield myself from decomposition
and keep the rust storms from my eyes.

Only shambling homunculi,
the flesh fleeing from their bones,
inhabit this once upon a time,
ghostly dirt-limned apparitions
who rehearse their passage endlessly
with no passion of a human kind.

Each instant has its apogee,
a present we infest with strife,
full with color, rife with sound,
before the while of consciousness dies,
before electrons in their orbits fail
and valences begin to lie.

Each fallen second tumbles by
coexistent with the here the now,
a tableau on a sunken stage
as timeworn and as timeless
and as hushed as winter skies,
drowned shadows we invest with life,
these fabled constructs of our minds.

—Bruce Boston

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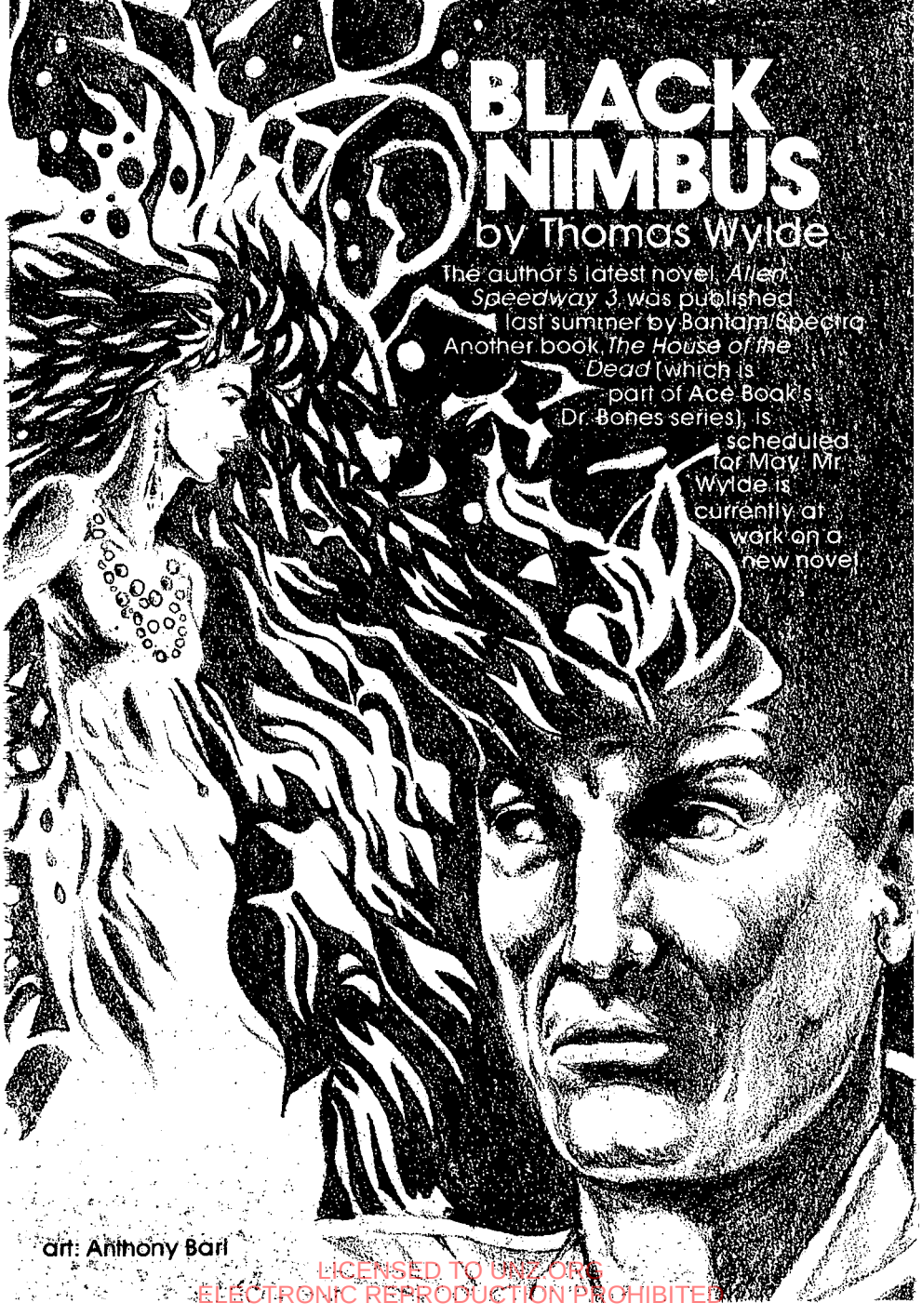
BLACK NIMBUS
by Thomas Wylde
The author's latest novel, *Alien Speedway 3*, was published last summer by Bantam/Spectra. Another book, *The House of the Dead* (which is part of Ace Book's Dr. Bones series), is scheduled for May. Mr. Wylde is currently at work on a new novel.
art: Anthony Bari

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When she came into the room, Michael almost dropped his drink. He'd just been standing there, listening to his brother Jack talk about the coming eclipse, when the door swung wide. The clatter and screech and excited rumble of the party drained from the room. He felt weak. The muscles of his hand relaxed, and the tall wet glass began to slide.

She was all lit up.

He stood ten feet away, but he couldn't have told you the color of her hair or how she was shaped or what she wore. Was she looking at him? He couldn't tell. Her glow became golden, feathered orange and red at the tips, breathing like fire.

He glanced around the room, astonished that no one paid the least attention to her. Was it *him?* Was he in rez with her? Impossible. When he looked again, the light flared, flared with such power its color shifted beyond blue, beyond violet, beyond any color in the visual spectrum. The light glittered, black as death: it burned through his skin like a blowtorch.

He woke sprawled across a pile of soft coats in a back bedroom, half stoned on perfume. His brother stood in the open doorway, dimly glowing. "How do you feel?"

He didn't even try to answer.

Jack said, "I take it you don't want to talk about the eclipse?"

He groaned.

"Total solar eclipse," said Jack. "They don't happen in L.A. very often. It's politics."

When he again got no answer, Jack said, "We finally lure you down out of the mountains, and you go wacky on us. How do you think that makes us feel?"

No answer.

Jack went on. "Alice says don't worry, the rug needed another whiskey stain to balance the New Year's Eve party."

Michael sneezed at him.

"You still look pretty fuzzed out," said Jack. "You wanna take a ride by the emergency room?"

He cleared his throat, but couldn't speak.

Jack leaned closer. He glanced up the hall, then closed the door and came to the bed. "You drop acid or what?"

"Didn't . . . didn't you . . . *see* her?"

"See who?"

Michael coughed, his head spinning. "Didn't you see the way she glowed?"

Jack smiled. "You must be on something."

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"I'm not stoned," he said, raising up on the bed. "The woman was burning."

"Uh-huh."

"There were sparks coming out of her hair."

"Whatever you say, pal." Jack bent near and slid a hand along the nape of his brother's neck, where the scar tissue ran slick. "You're not connected, are you?"

"How *can* I be?"

"That's what I thought."

"I don't even own one."

"I know."

"Who was she?"

Jack straightened up. "I guess some new people came in about the time you hit the deck. What did she look like?"

"Yellow and red and orange, at first. Maybe a tinge of green. Then . . . something happened . . . something dark. . . ."

Jack nodded. "That should narrow it down."

Michael flopped back on the bed and stared at the ceiling, his eyes still burning with the sight of her dazzling smile. No, that wasn't right. He'd seen no smile—just the dazzle.

"This is weird," he whispered.

The door opened a crack. "Is your brother all right?" Alice crept in, looking concerned. Michael's sensitivity had already declined; her lights were pale.

Jack said, "We haven't decided if he's all right or not. Apparently he saw some . . . woman."

Alice grinned. "Finally! I was beginning to wonder about him."

Michael groaned. "She was on fire!"

Jack said, "And now his heart smolders in sweet agony."

"Pierced by Cupid's arrow," said Alice. "Just like in the cartoons."

"This is no goddamn cartoon. Did you ever see anybody *glow*, for Chrissake?!"

"You mean, when I wasn't connected?" Jack looked at Alice. "Not exactly."

"Go to hell," said Alice, laughing.

"Something's happening," said Michael. "Something horrible."

That night, he dreamed a fire swept down the brush-covered hills behind his cabin and burned everything: his books, his paintings, his records, his furniture, his bed. He woke with the taste of ashes and a headache that wouldn't quit.

Later that morning, he drove back into town. The summer sun reflected

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so brightly off the truck's hood that he had to pull off the road and dig around in the glove compartment for an old pair of sunglasses. He wiped the lenses on his shirt and put them on. The glasses fit crooked, the nose-support all bent up and scratchy. By the time he got to his brother's house, he wanted to throw the damned things out the window.

He climbed down from the truck and walked to the edge of the lawn. On the far side Jack marched round and round the bricked-in clumps of roses, shrouded by dust and flying grass and the whine of an electric weed-eater.

Michael tried to yell, but his throbbing head would not permit it. He sat down in the shade of the porch and waited for Jack to turn around and see him.

Alice came out of the house with two ice-cold beers. She smiled, handed Michael the beers, and nodded toward Jack. She had disappeared into the house before Jack cut the motor. He laid the weed-eater down and took the beer Michael held out. He gulped down half of it, then motioned with the can. "Is your face on wrong?"

Michael touched his sunglasses, propping them up. The damned things drooped as soon as he let go. Jack nodded and took another big swallow of his beer. Michael just held his, letting the condensation drop to the flagstones, where it gleamed in a pool of sunlight. Jack wiped his face with a forearm and sat down on the steps. "You still look stunned."

"I have to know who was at the party last night."

"Ask Alice. She's the social director around here. I'm just the guy with the Mastercard."

"Was I set up?"

"Not that I know of."

"Would she tell you?"

"I think so."

Michael took a sip of his beer. It tasted bitter. "Last night was like getting burned out, all over again."

"You said that couldn't happen."

"That's what they *told* me. I mean, I *counted* on never having to go through that again. I don't think I ever told you how bad it—"

"You sure this wasn't just a flashback?"

"Couldn't be. Too directional."

"Uh-huh."

"It was *her,* man. It was definitely her."

"I see." Jack took another long pull. "Then I don't know what to tell you."

Michael flicked the sweat off his beer can. "Right."

"Sorry."

"I know."

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Jack tipped his beer, emptied it, and crushed the can. "What do you say I pave over the yard with concrete? Be a lot less work."

Michael handed him his beer. "Here, work on this."

He found Alice on the rug in the family room, kneeling over the sports section of the Sunday *Times*.

"Baseball scores?"

She shook her head. "Tire sales. I'm going bald on the left side."

"Sorry to hear it."

"Don't you just love the way they do this?" She showed him an ad. "They use the biggest numbers for the lowest price—but the tire they're talking about wouldn't fit a kiddie car." She turned the page and smoothed it out. "See, here's another one."

Michael said, "Let's talk about last night."

She smiled up at him. "The bigger they are, the harder they fall."

"It can't be love."

"How would *you* know?"

Her smile said, "joke," but that was bullshit. He said, "I don't deserve that."

She refused to back down. "You whine too much, Michael. You give up too easy. So you got burned? So what? If you don't like it, get another implant. Get a good one, this time, not that army crap."

"Oh, I see. A *good* one."

Like the army had given him a choice.

"They've improved a lot," she said.

"Is that right?"

"Spend some money. Cash one of those fat checks they keep sending you."

"Christ."

"You bring these things on yourself, Michael. You used to be so—"

"Alice, I just need to know who the hell she was. I need to know if there was any way she could have been broadcasting."

"What do you think, she was wearing some kind of military rig?"

"How should I know? I'm not that sensitive."

"You can see my light, can't you?"

He could, faintly. Her aura pulsed blue-green, unreadable except for the tinge of embarrassed protest. She knew she had hurt him, but she was defensive about it.

"We're not talking about lights, Alice. The woman was pushing mega-watts."

She smiled. "See? That's what I told Jack. You're in resonance."

"Then heaven help me."

"But it's wonderful! You make it sound so *dangerous*."

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"It is for *me!*"

She laughed.

"I'm serious!" He could feel his face heating up. Weren't these people paying attention?

"You poor thing," she said. "You really are squirming on the hook."

"Oh, thanks."

"You want me to tell you what to do?"

"Just tell me who she is. I'll get somebody to check her out."

"I thought you were retired."

He gave her the standard look—more bullshit, of course, but she probably knew that.

"Come back next Friday," she said. "About eight."

"Do you know her?"

She just smiled.

"Does she know me?"

She laughed again.

"Did she *say* anything about me?"

"You poor thing!"

"Oh, shit."

He sat down in the middle of his living room and stared at everything he owned. At the stereo and the records and the paintings on the walls and the paperbacks on the shelves. At the easels and the paints and the stretched canvases leaning against the stone walls. At the stacks of unsold paintings, glistening with the abstract webs of light nobody wanted to see. At the split-vinyl chairs and the droop-backed sofa covered with a thriftstore quilt. He looked through the window at the dusty green chaparral, the sage and the live oak and the red-skinned manzanita—as yet untouched by the fire of his dreams.

And he thought:

Just wait.

It's coming.

It was a lousy week. He couldn't work, he couldn't read, he couldn't even pull weeds right. He wasted a lot of time going through a shoebox full of old photos he'd found in the closet. Pictures of people he hadn't seen in years: mom and dad and little Jack, the neighborhood kids, army guys, old girlfriends—everybody he knew, all the people he now avoided.

The kitchen had emptied out, but he couldn't face the drive into town, not even to go to the market. On Thursday night he had to eat three-year-old macaroni-and-cheese mixed with water (he had no milk) and some kind of powdered fruit drink that had long since caked up in the envelope.

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All day Friday he tried on shirts and washed shirts and dug shirts out of boxes he hadn't seen in two years. Turned out he owned a lot of stupid shirts.

At sundown, he was in the pickup, grinding his way in low gear out of the canyon, crossing and recrossing the stream, his fat tires cracking stones and tossing them aside. Every cabin he passed glowed with security and warmth from every window. He kept stalling his truck in the creek bed.

When he got out on the pavement, he couldn't seem to do better than twenty-five miles per hour. Happy drunks lined up behind him just to test their high-beams.

He drove as carefully as he could, but still Jack's place wasn't far enough away. He cruised around the block, past the bright lights spilling out of the windows. He ignored a lot of fine parking spots and went around the block again.

Passing Jack's house for the third time, he made up his mind he wouldn't come unprepared, and he burned rubber getting the hell out of there. He found an electronic parts market down on Burbank Boulevard and rented a remote unit for the night.

"Enjoy yourself, Ace," said the guy at the counter.

"You bet."

It was past ten when he got back to Jack's, again looking for a place to park. He ended up a block and a half away, and left the truck under a buzzing streetlight. He tried walking slow, but it didn't make much difference. Soon he could see the light spread out on the lawn, broken by moving shadows, and he could hear the music and the grumble of voices, none of which sounded familiar.

He took several deep breaths and cut across the lawn to the edge of the big picture window. He smoothed back his hair, then peeked around the corner.

The glow hovered beside Alice like a captive chunk of the sun. Jack joined them, saying something, and he and Alice laughed. The glow flickered, its glare obscuring all detail.

Michael dug into his jacket pocket for the sunglasses and held them in front of his eyes. Everything in the room dimmed but the glow; it actually brightened.

He took down the glasses. Jack said something and Alice laughed again. The glow rippled and sparked.

Michael slumped behind the wall and closed his eyes, waiting for his heart to stop pounding. After a minute he thought he might have to wait forever, and that made him mad.

Come on, come on, get going! If you're going to do it, *do* it!

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He reached down and thumbed the controls on the scanning remote hooked to the belt. At once, his right foot began to tingle, even worse than it had in the parts market. This unit had to be a couple of years out of calibration.

For a test, he picked a group of noisy, drink-waving folks in a corner of the room. As he cranked up the gain, auras flared, blue and red and green. Strangers, mostly.

He turned the gain down and ducked back out of sight, unable to get his breath. He let another minute go by, then got mad again. Just do it! Do it!

He jerked his head around and centered on the glow. If the notch filter in the rejection circuit was working right, it would be able to shunt the load at the point of resonance. *If* there was resonance.

As he watched, not quite ready, the glow shifted, turned, and swept across the room. He ducked behind the wall, saw the beam pass through the window like a smoking laser, lighting up the houses across the street.

Oh, man, now his brain was objectifying the damned thing!

A scrawl of cryptic symbols flickered at the edge of his vision—Japanese circuit glyphs. Reset. He raised up, centered the light again, and keyed the quantum hunt mode. The unit hissed as it scanned, sampling baseline neural states. His right foot began to buzz; he could feel it getting hot. Come on, come on! The detector chimed: the glow fluttered and dimmed, and he caught the faintest outline of a woman standing there, lost in a dark nimbus. Then the glow blossomed again—the detector had broken lock. The notch filter twanged at cut-off, dropping out of the circuit.

Jesus Christ.

He ran the program through again—same thing. "Damn it!" he whispered. This remote was just too screwed up to do the job.

He started to turn away, juggling the unit, feeling for the thumb switches. More symbols floated in front of him—exclamation points in red, lightning bolts in yellow—warnings of overload. Oh, great! His right foot went dead as he stepped down, and he curled forward, hitting the grass.

The objectified beam swept around again, burning through the wall, lighting him up where he lay. He froze, his heart pounding. He couldn't help it—he raised up and looked into the room, looked right *at* her.

Their eyes locked; alarms trilled in sour, Oriental warning. Jack's house bulged, exploding in brilliant, simulated fire. This time, *she* fainted.

He ripped the sticky contacts from his neck and started running. Every blade of grass on the lawn stood writhing in its own column of blue flame.

He drove home fast and packed his sleeping bag and camping gear and

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filled some big plastic jugs with creek water. He found an open supermarket, bought a lot of canned meat and chili and chips, and got on the Foothill Freeway, headed out of town. He caught 14 going northeast, up the valley past Palmdale and Lancaster and Mojave, then joined 395, running due north.

His knobby tires thrummed against the asphalt, singing a high, hollow note. The road was dark, straight and empty. He could see nothing but the occasional light way out on the desert. He cranked the windows down, letting the warm night air blow over him. After a while, he noticed he could breathe again. He almost smiled.

Just before dawn, he made the familiar crest at Townes Pass—the western gateway to Death Valley National Monument. By the time he'd driven the forty-odd miles to Furnace Creek, it was full morning and already a hundred degrees. That was fine with him.

He drove into the empty campground and claimed his usual slot—a concrete picnic table and a view of nothing. Climbing out of the truck, he stopped halfway down, one boot in the dirt, and listened to the ringing silence. Nothing moved, nothing *glowed*. He took a breath. Sweat trickled down his cheeks, and a hot wind blew his hair around. Okay.

The chili was warm enough to eat right out of the can. He sat on the greasy top of the concrete table and stared out across the nothing he had come to see. Sweat dropped off his face into the chili. He smiled, finally.

Paradise.

A week later, he drove up over the hump into his parking area. He shut down the truck and sat there for a moment, listening to the engine tick.

The late afternoon sky hung low with dark, rain-swollen clouds. He got out and stood in the dust beside the truck, looking up the canyon. Dry leaves rustled in a cool breeze; the creek gurgled over the rocks. He took a deep breath. Everything looked fine—flat and lifeless.

In the mailbox at the side of the road, he found his disability check and a bill from the electronic parts market, demanding full payment for the rental remote he hadn't returned. Screw 'em both.

He carried some of his gear up to the cabin. Around back, he pulled a note from the crack of the kitchen door. His brother wanted him to call—something urgent. For a moment he wondered what it could be, then he frowned. Oh, yeah.

He went inside. The cabin was warm, the air stale. He opened windows to the breeze and looked around. Nothing had changed. He wandered about from room to room, looking at everything, feeling the quiet.

Chin Lai used to fill these silences with her yowling Siamese calls, but she was gone now. You couldn't keep cats in the mountains—the coyotes

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chased them down and ate them. All for the best, probably. Chin Lai had begun to purr too much, giving him headaches. She had become too *alive,* had risen too far from the flat background he needed. He still had her little blue plastic dish, though, stuffed in a box on a high closet shelf.

He turned on the radio, but couldn't find anything he could stand to listen to, and turned it off. Outside, the oak leaves hissed. He sat down on the sofa, leaned back, and closed his eyes.

The breeze came and went, pushing the trees. The curtains filled and floated and dropped. The refrigerator came on and murmured quietly. In five minutes, it went off.

He got up and walked all around again, seeing the things that needed his attention—the peeling paint and the loose mortar and the hole in the wall where he'd fixed the leaking pipe. Too much, too much. He sat back down in one of the big vinyl chairs. From here he could see the shoebox of old photos he'd left on the kitchen table. The thought of them made him sick, and he closed his eyes so he wouldn't have to look at the box. The refrigerator came on and ran for five minutes and shut off. Dark curtains lifted and fell, breathing in time with the sizzling trees. From far away came the growl of a chainsaw. The afternoon light faded.

Two hours later, the rain began to fall. After a while, he got up from the chair and closed the windows. His curtains were getting soaked.

The next morning he lay in bed a long time. At ten-thirty, the phone rang ten times and stopped. He threw off the sheet and stared at the ceiling.

By eleven, the room had become warm and stuffy. He rolled out of bed and opened the windows. Hot dry air blew in. So much for a summer rain.

He toasted both halves of an English muffin, slathered them with some margarine, and went out on the kitchen patio. Five minutes later, the phone started ringing again. This time he answered it.

"You're back!" said Jack.

"Correct."

"Where'd you go, the desert?"

"As usual."

"How was it?"

"Okay for a while. But it got crowded, and I left."

"It's the eclipse. Folks want a nice clear view."

"Yeah, that's what they all said. Me, I'd rather watch it through the smog."

"Uh-huh. Have you noticed?"

"What?"

"You're about a week late for the party."

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"Oh, the party. Actually, I was there."
His brother laughed. "That was you?"
"Yeah."
"She hit the deck like a sack of wet cement."
"I know."
"You're a killer with the chicks, Michael."
"Just with *one* of them, apparently."
"So? One's all you need, when you're in rez."
Yeah, right. He pictured the explosion in Jack's living room.
"Did you hear me?"
"I'm sorry, Jack. It's just too weird."
"Sure you don't want to try again?"
He leaned against the stone wall and looked through the kitchen door into the center of his empty house. He said nothing.
"You might be surprised."
"That's just the point, Jack. I can't afford to be surprised."
"Apparently not."
"It's just the way things are now."
"Alice is real disappointed in you."
"Did she buy new tires yet?"
"No."
"Maybe that will cheer her up."
"You're a hard man."
"I'm a loner."
"You're a dumb fuck, if you want the truth."
"Thank you."
He got back to the patio in time to see a scrub jay flying off with the last of his breakfast muffin. The bird was flat and lifeless.

In three days, the eclipse came around. So-Cal Edison had spent so much money advertising the damned thing, he decided that he might as well go take a look. He packed some apples and a canteen of water and walked up the hill behind his cabin. The city stretched out beneath a brown haze that filled the San Fernando valley like dirty water in a shallow bowl. The metal of moving cars winked in the sunlight. It was almost noon.

He sat down on a flat rock at the crest of the hill. Shading his eyes, he looked up into the bright sky. There he found, overpowered by the glare of the sun, the pale disk of the new solar collector. Orbiting now where it had been constructed, some four hundred miles up, the collector could hide sixteen suns lined up side by side. Soon it would be moved out into geosynchronous orbit, where it would cover but a tenth of the

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sun, its rare transits going largely unnoticed. This full eclipse was to be the last.

He checked his watch, then looked out over the silent valley of flickering light. He'd made it just in time.

In two minutes, the edge of the collector, moving from west to east, began to cut across the sun's disk. In six or seven seconds, the sun had nearly disappeared, and the whitened dust around him rippled with the shadows of heat waves in the air. The city looked sullen and subdued, as though black clouds had filled the sky. Automatic streetlights came on, crisscrossing the valley in lines of tiny sparks. Traffic had slowed with folks pulling off to the curb to watch the eclipse.

Swiftly, the dark umbra of the shadow crossed the hills and swept over the valley. The solar corona flared pale white for a moment at the tips of the collector's jagged edge, then it was gone. Winter stars came out, dotting the gloomy purple sky, and bright Venus glimmered in the west. To the east, an infinitesimal sliver of moon curved away from the sun's fading glow. In seconds, it too was overtaken by the black disk of the collector.

Michael looked out over the valley. More lights had come on, but not as many as on a normal night. No doubt folks remained outside, standing in the cool wind that blew across the basin, watching the sudden night, chattering their excitement.

Something caught his eye in the muted, smoggy glow of the city—a bright spark, flickering red and orange and green, like a smokeless blaze in a fireworks factory. He stood up, sweat chilling his forehead. Tiny popping noises crackled from the valley—gunfire of the superstitious, urging the darkness away.

The fire in the city brightened, its glare now almost blinding. He stumbled backward.

Oh, God, he thought. It's *her*. She's down there. And she *sees* me.

He couldn't look away. All around him, the hilltop burned. The light flickered. It *turned,* somehow, and for the first time he had the sense that someone lurked *behind* the glow, someone alive, intimate, threatening, someone powerful and questing.

Go dark, he told the light. Go dark, go dim, go out, go dark! He stared at the light, desperately forcing his message into the glow. Go dark, dim out, fade away, leave me *alone*. The light glowed, growing brighter.

"Please!"

The light pulsed, scintillating, as if balanced on indecision. Then, slowly, it began to dim.

He jerked his eyes away and saw the sky, where the sun's white corona again flared, re-emerging. For perhaps fifteen seconds, the eclipse had

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been total. Now the black disk of the collector slid away from the sun in measured glide.

He took a deep breath and searched the valley, finding with some effort the dimming glow. He locked on, saw it brighten—his heart seizing, knotted up in momentary confusion—then the spark faded, continued to die. The net of streetlights blinked out, startling him.

He lost sight of the glow, finding it again just at the edge of perception. How quickly the sky grew bright! Cars squirmed in the valley, reflections glinting. His eyes watered. Day was returning, and the distant valley filled again with the stutter of gunfire, the faint peeping of car horns, a celebration dedicated to the emerging sun. Light shimmered through the smog: the windshields of moving cars, their bumpers and mirrors, rotating signs and welding sparks, the windows of houses swinging shut, a myriad nameless flickering points—the lights were everywhere, everywhere. . . . ●

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DANCING WITH THE CHAIRS

by James Patrick Kelly

James Patrick Kelly's most recent novel, *Look Into the Sun,* will be released next month by Tor Books. That novel was developed from a story, "The Glass Cloud," which appeared in our own June 1987 issue. The author now returns to our pages with a subtle piece of fantasy that explores the complexity of present-day relationships.

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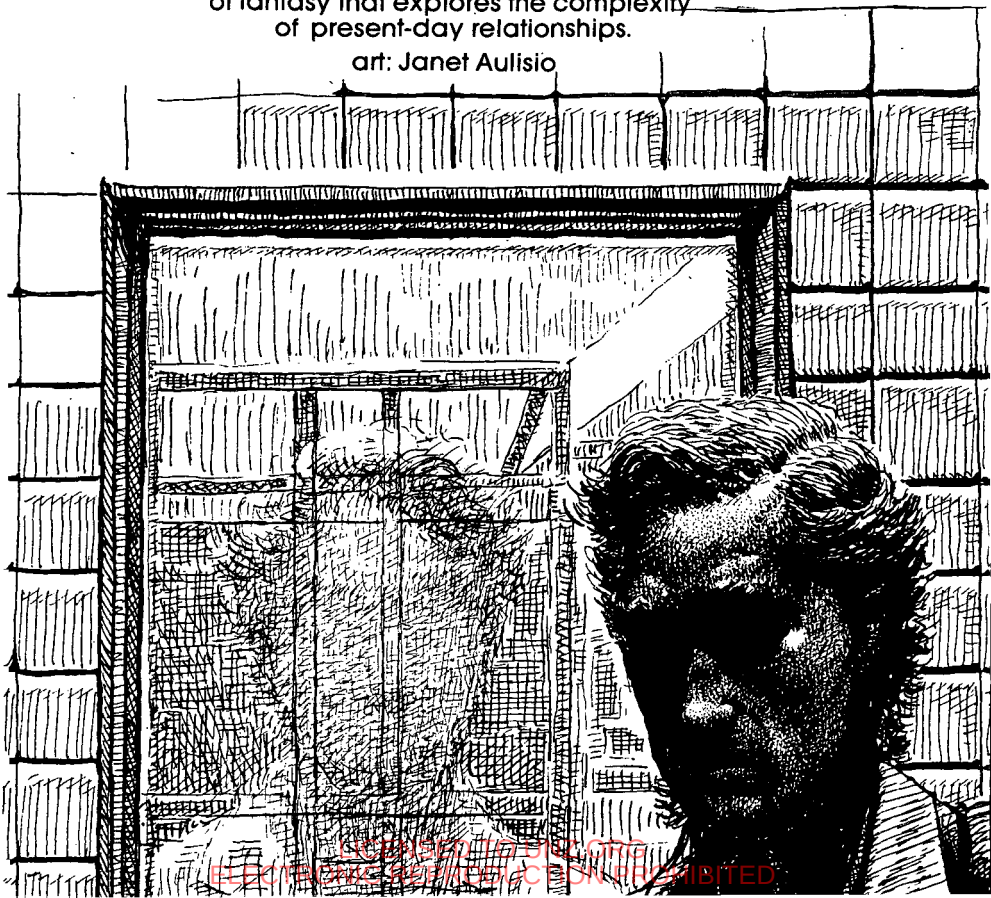

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Jack stared at the mirror in the men's room of O'Brien's and tried to convince himself he did not look all that bad. He tightened the knot of his Perry Ellis silk tie—the one she had given him for his birthday. He pulled the comb from his back pocket and straightened the part in his hair. Up until a few months ago, he used to pluck out the gray. Now there was too much. Well, he had seen something of life, no doubt about that. A speck of dried blood had crusted over the spot just under his jaw where he had cut himself shaving that morning. He dipped his forefinger under a stream of warm water and washed the scab away. But there was nothing he could do about his eyes.

Someone flushed. In the long mirror, Jack saw a drooping man in a dark suit emerge from one of the stalls. He slouched up to the row of sinks. It was a decent suit, a navy chalk stripe that hung like worsted wool, but somehow it reminded Jack of a new paint job on a junk car: could be it was the only thing holding the poor slob together. The button just above his belt had popped open. His face was as dreary as a used tea bag. He looked the way Jack felt.

As the guy was soaping his hands, he peered at Jack's reflection and said, "You're in love, aren't you?"

"What?" Jack was startled. "Why do you say that?" It was something he had been wondering about himself.

"You have the look."

"And what's that?"

"Trying to find yourself in mirrors." He unwound a paper towel from the dispenser. "Married, aren't you?"

It wasn't much of a deduction; Jack was wearing his ring. He nodded cautiously.

"But it isn't her."

At that moment, Jack knew what he ought to do was walk. Get the hell out of there. It wasn't his style to put up with this kind of crap. Except that the guy was right. "No," he said. "It isn't." He turned on the hot water and watched himself wash his hands.

The guy didn't say a word until Jack finished. "This woman—she ever make you cry?"

Jack sniffed at the absurdity of it. "No way."

"And when you're in bed with her, do you ever make, like, *sounds?*"

Jack did walk then. He couldn't believe he had stayed as long as he had. Humoring weirdos in the men's room—he shook his head in amazement. A new low.

He crossed the lobby to the heavy oak pedestal that defended the entrance to the dining room. The maitre d' was behind it, taking names; O'Brien's was always jammed on Fridays. A handful of people were standing in line. Jack cut around them. The maitre d's smile was stretched

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a little thin as he shrugged and told Jack that he could seat him immediately if necessary but that if he really wanted that table with the view of the harbor, it would be another ten or fifteen minutes. Would he like to wait in the bar? Jack glanced at his watch. She was already late. He tugged his sleeve back into place and said the bar would be fine.

He sat at a table the size of a Cadillac's hubcap and a waitress came right over. Jack ordered a manhattan for himself. He thought about getting her a margarita but decided to hold off. Susanne was never late; it was one of the things he liked best about her. She was more organized than most men he knew. She knew exactly what she wanted and when she wanted something, she didn't hesitate to go out and get it. No wasted motion. Jack had been thrilled when one of the things she had wanted was him. He had told her more than once how it was the thrill of his life.

He wondered what was going on with her. The drink came and the first thing he did was eat the cherry out of the manhattan. When he went out to eat with the family, he always had to give the cherry to one of the kids. He thought again about leaving the kids. Leaving Anne. Kissing off seventeen years—of what? Pork chops, sitcoms, and bad sex. She had given him the most boring years of her life. Of course, he knew she would make him pay. There would be child support for sure, maybe alimony. He'd lose the house, all that antique furniture that no one could sit on. He sipped his drink. Good fucking riddance. He thought he could do it. If he told Susanne today, they could maybe even be together by that weekend and the week after that and from then on. Happily ever after, world without end, amen. It seemed doable. He took another sip. It seemed very doable.

The man in the blue suit pulled up the chair next to him. "Sorry if I offended you."

Jack gave him an arctic stare. "The seat is taken."

The man sat anyway. "I don't know what's happening to me. Haven't been myself." He laid his head in his hands. "Haven't been *anyone,* really. Look, I'll leave as soon as she comes. Okay? Just let me sit a minute. You don't have to talk, don't even have to listen. It's just. . . . Please."

Jack scooted his chair around and gave the creep his back. Still, he was worried. He had enough troubles, didn't he? And how did the guy know he was waiting for Susanne? Another lucky guess? Maybe ignoring him wasn't enough. Maybe he ought to get someone to throw him out. But Jack didn't want to be in the middle of sorting out this mess when Susanne finally came.

"My wife left me about a month ago. I didn't have a clue ahead of time. She said she'd been seeing someone else and she was in love. Makes you wonder, you know. While she was in love with *him,* what was *I* in? A fantasy world, I guess. The Twilight Zone."

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Jack watched the bartender filling beer mugs. He couldn't believe the guy was really going to harass him like this. He didn't need it—not now.

"You probably think I'm a chump. Hey, I *know* it. The thing is, I still can't figure out how it happened." He drew a deep breath. "Name's Frank, by the way."

Silence.

"Yeah, well," said Frank, "I realize this isn't any fun for you, but is there a chance you'd do me a favor? I could really use a Scotch on the rocks."

Then it made sense to Jack. He was just a lush hustling free drinks. Probably on a binge—poor son of a bitch had no idea what the hell he was saying or who he was saying it to. Jack turned and was about to cut the guy down when he saw that Frank had pushed a twenty dollar bill across the little table. Jack could not help but notice the gold Rolex on the man's wrist.

He didn't touch the money. "Why don't you buy it yourself?"

"I can't seem to get anyone's attention." Frank picked up Jack's cocktail napkin. "Maybe if I wave this." He flicked his wrist and the napkin unfolded. "Drinker in distress. Send Johnny Walker."

Jack raised his forefinger; across the room their waitress veered off course with an answering nod. He couldn't believe that Frank had tried very hard. If anything, they were too fussy at O'Brien's. The staff hovered like servile vultures, filling water glasses, whisking empty plates away, changing silverware. Sometimes you wished they'd let you eat in peace.

The waitress threaded her way to their table. Jack waited for Frank to say something. It was odd; she could see that Jack had a manhattan and Frank was dry, yet she seemed to be expecting Jack to order. Finally Jack said, "Scotch on the rocks—make it a double. And another manhattan." The waitress headed for the bar and he pushed Frank's twenty back to him.

"Thanks," said Frank. "Lately I've been feeling kind of—I don't know—unreal. Like a ghost. Sometimes I get scared that I'll say something and nobody will notice. You ever feel that way? No, probably not. I used to think I was real. I *was*—I've got twenty-two people working for me. Our group booked nearly three million dollars in '88. I've got a kid, he plays the violin. We started him when he was three. Suzuki method, you know. Last year he went to the National Music Camp out in Michigan. They say he could make Juilliard. And all along the wife was telling me she loved me. Of course, I believed her. Why would she lie about something like that?" He tore the corner off the cocktail napkin, rolled it into a little ball and tossed it into the ashtray. "But then something like this happens, and you find out that you don't really exist. You're like a cell in *1-2-3*. Someone hits the delete key and you're gone. The

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world recalculates around where you used to be like a goddamned spreadsheet."

The round arrived and he stopped ranting. Jack surveyed the bar, wishing that Susanne would come to the rescue.

"Thanks," Frank said to the waitress. There was no way she could ignore him—but she did. An anguished look flickered across his face; Jack could see that he was teetering right on the edge. The waitress laid the check on the table. "I'll take that when you're ready." She smiled at Jack as if she expected a big tip and moved quickly off.

Frank's hand trembled as he brought the glass to his mouth. The liquor seemed to steady him. "Sorry about what I said in the john. About the sounds. It's just, I'm trying to figure things out. I'm trying to find out what's left of me. I used to think I *was* my job, you know? But now I realize that everyone at the office is like . . . parts. Replaceable, just like that." He snapped his fingers. "Maybe if I had friends, they'd miss me. But I don't, not really. I mean, I know lots of people there, but nobody has the faintest idea who I am."

Jack let his hand drop beneath the table and then twisted his wrist so that he could check his watch. He didn't want Frank to know he was looking. He was beginning to feel sorry for the guy; he had to be in a hell of a lot of pain to make a fool of himself like this.

"And, I used to think I was my family. But the kid is seventeen, and now he's all wrapped up in the music. Busy becoming himself. And the wife. . . ." Frank was filling the ashtray with little napkin balls. "She said something the night we split. About the sounds, I mean. She always used to say I never talked to her when we were in the sack together. That night she said even if I had made *sounds,* that would have been something. It would've shown I was there. Well, where the hell did she think I was? Then I got to thinking: what kind of sounds did she want me to make? Did she want me to growl or what? Yodel?"

Despite himself, Jack smiled.

"It's like I don't exist. I'm forty-four years old and all of a sudden I realize there's nothing to me."

All across the room people were telling jokes, laughing, gossiping, cutting deals, flirting, planning their weekends. The bar was filled with noise, but somehow all Jack could hear was Frank's awful silence.

"This isn't what men do, is it? Talk, I mean." Frank drained the last of his drink. "Why is that, I wonder?" He eyed his empty glass as if it might be the answer. "I've said too much, I know it. But I've been holding it in ever since. . . ." He shook his head as if to flick away the memory. "So, tell me about her. Your true love. What's it like when you're with her?"

Maybe it was because the two manhattans had eroded Jack's reserve.

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Or perhaps it was because Frank had spilled his guts right here on the table in the bar at O'Brien's; Jack was secretly impressed. "She's smart and tough and she's going places. It's the most exciting thing in the world," he said, thinking it might help the poor bastard to hear how good it could be with the right woman. "Nothing else is even close. I never feel so alive as when I'm with her."

Frank wasn't listening. "Julie," he said. "My wife's name is Julie."

Jack resented the interruption; he could have talked about Susanne for hours. Then he spotted her standing at the door and nothing else mattered. He shot out of his chair. "Excuse me, I've got to go." On an impulse, he reached down and shook hands with Frank. "Good luck."

Frank nodded. "Thanks." There was a wet streak down his face. "You too."

Jack bumped through an infestation of drinkers swarming in the aisle by the bar. It seemed like they were blocking his way on purpose. Finally he was hugging her.

"Sorry I'm late," she said.

He could feel the warmth of her cheek on his face; his hand slid naturally to her hip. He was so relieved to see her that he couldn't speak at first.

"Been waiting long?"

Jack hadn't realized how much Frank's story had upset him. "Oh, I don't know," he said. He didn't know why he was whispering. "Met a guy, we were having a drink." He decided then it was best just to forget it. Put it out of his mind. It was Frank's problem. He glanced back at the table; Frank was gone. She patted the small of his back and he let her go. "Let's eat," he said.

The view from O'Brien's best table was sensational. Clouds drifted across a cornflower sky; the marina across the harbor was draped with a necklace of pearly yachts. Waves caught the sunlight and scattered it across the water. But Jack wasn't interested in scenery; he was too busy admiring Susanne. She was wearing a beaujolais-colored suit, a white silk blouse with a silver rose clasp at the neck where a man might have worn a tie. Her hair was as dark as coffee. When he had first met her, she had worn it short, but after they had become lovers, she let it grow. For him. It brushed against her shoulders now and Jack was sure it was the most astonishing hair in the world.

He couldn't help but think of the first time they had eaten at this table, the day after they had first made love. She had told him then that she wanted to get married someday and have a baby and bring her to a place like this where everyone could see. Maybe hold the kid up; she expected applause. Jack intended to remind her of that later.

The waiter stopped by to tell them the specials: lobster kedgeree, fillets

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of sole amandine, chicken paprika and spinach quiche. He asked if they wanted drinks and Jack deferred to Susanne. "I've had enough already." He gave her his best smile; he didn't mean for it to sound like an accusation. She picked up her napkin as if it were made of glass and said nothing. The waiter pointedly took in the view until Jack ended the silence by ordering his usual: steak au poivre, medium. Susanne asked for a large salad as if she were just making polite conversation. The waiter bustled off and Jack was filled with unexpected dread at the prospect of being left alone with her.

"I've been trying to get in touch with you all week," he said. "Your secretary said you had called in sick."

"No, I'm okay. Played hooky and painted my condo."

"I left messages on your answering machine."

"I know."

He leaned back in his chair. "What's that supposed to mean?"

"I was thinking."

"For three days? About what?"

The waiter interrupted them with a basket of bread and a cheese ball. They concentrated on not looking at each other until he had gone.

"I was just so sick of that eggshell color," she said. "Reminded me of all the beige at the office. I mean, I spend the day at the office, I worry about the office all the way home and when I get there, what's waiting for me? Sometimes I even sleep with the office." She gave him a crooked smile. "Anyway, I went crazy. The bedroom is peach now and the living room is this yellowy green, I think it's called meadow brook."

"Susanne, I was worried."

She examined her hands. "I've been thinking about us. About what you said about leaving Anne."

"I'm going to do it. Finally. That's what I wanted to tell you." He reached into the bread basket and rewarded himself with a warm caramel bun. "I was thinking of talking to her today."

"Don't." Susanne kept her face down, as if she were speaking into her soup spoon.

"I have to." Jack was trying to stay calm. "It's time." He wanted her to make eye contact with him. What was she afraid of? "I thought we agreed."

Silence.

"Susanne, what is it?"

She shook her head. "*I* never agreed. That's the problem, Jack. You make things up about us. If I don't say anything, you think I mean yes. If I say no, you hear maybe."

"Susanne, I have to do this if we're going to be together."

She made a sound that might have been a laugh except that she looked

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at him then and he saw she was crying. He wanted to reach across the table and stop the tears. He didn't want her to cry, not now, not ever. It was important to him.

"I don't know what to say to you, Jack."

He smiled sympathetically. "Just tell me you love me."

"I don't love anybody." She shook her head and he noticed how strands of her beautiful hair caught on the weave of her wool suit. "I want to love someone." He remembered how her hair looked when it caressed her bare shoulders, the way it spread across a white pillowcase. "But I don't."

He changed his mind; he thought she was was very brave to cry in O'Brien's like this. People were noticing but she didn't care. The tears made her face seem so soft. It made him love her all the more.

"But *I* love *you*," he said. He reached across the table toward her. She watched his hand but didn't take it. "Right now my love is enough for both of us. I'll wait for you to catch up."

She dabbed her eyes with the napkin and then stared out the window. "A bunch of us used to paint houses when I was at Brandeis. Summer job; I did interiors. I wore these overalls, they looked like an explosion at the Glidden factory. Sometimes I used to paint myself, just for the fun of it. I don't do things like that anymore. I was trimming the bedroom yesterday and wondering why? I felt this urge—I don't know. I painted the window peach, the glass. So no one could see in. I don't like who I am, Jack. I don't think that girl in the spattered overalls wanted to be me when she grew up."

"There's nothing wrong with you. Susanne, you're everything to me."

"I don't want to be everything to you. You ask too much. I'm just one person—and not a very smart one. But you expect me to be the whole world for you. I can't. It's too much, more than anyone can do."

"We can be together. I'm ready now. I thought that was what you wanted."

"I'm so confused, Jack. I know what everyone else wants but I'm not sure what I want anymore." She covered his hand with hers. "I can't be with you. I'm sorry."

"My god, Susanne, I love you. Doesn't that mean anything? Can't you hear me?"

"You know, they used to call me Susie and I didn't mind it at all." Her face hardened. She pulled away from him. "I can't see you anymore."

"I can't accept that," he said as the waiter brought their lunch. When he set Susanne's salad before her, she got up and walked out.

In front of Jack appeared a steak au poivre, medium. His eyes burned as if they had caught fire. He felt more at that moment than he had in the last ten years. It was very bad—almost more than he could bear. He saved himself by imagining he was across the harbor at the marina,

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watching himself through binoculars. It was all that kept him from crying. He cut a slice of steak and pushed it to the side of his plate. He was sure everyone would be staring at him, yet when he finally dared a peek, all he saw were people eating lunch, paying him no attention whatsoever. He cut more meat. The waiter glided by, his body cocked against a tray of lobster kedgeree and chicken paprika. He gave no sign of just having witnessed a tragedy.

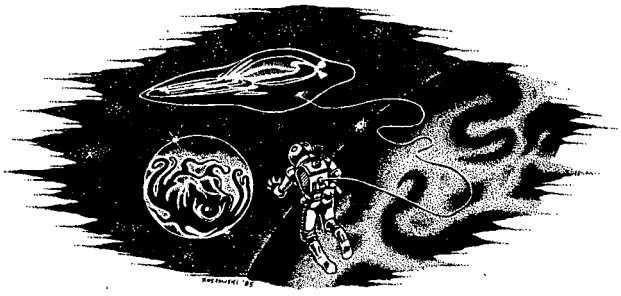
Relieved, Jack sliced yet another piece of steak. He was very careful: a surgical job of carving. Too bad he wasn't hungry. He was pretty sure that nobody at the office knew about their affair; he had been very careful. Nobody knew anything about him and he hadn't cried. He put his knife down and stared out the window for a while and tried to remember what Susanne had ordered the first time they had gotten that table. The best table in O'Brien's. It wasn't over, he thought. No way; he wasn't giving up yet. She didn't really mean it. She'd been so emotional; that wasn't like her. She wasn't herself at all. He should have tried to calm her down—what was all that about the paint?

It wasn't until he was cutting the last piece of steak that he noticed the blotches of congealed fat. Jack realized he had lost track of the time, and then looked around O'Brien's in a panic.

Two men in green coveralls were cleaning the empty restaurant. A kid with frizzy blonde hair was putting the chairs up on the tables. He was wearing a Walkman and, as he worked, he swiveled his hips and dropped his shoulders to some private melody: a punk Fred Astaire dancing cheek to cheek with wooden Gingers. An older man, about Jack's age, was vacuuming the rug at the far end of the dining room.

"Hey," Jack called. *"Hey."* He stood. "Where *is* everybody?"

No one paid attention. The kid kept dancing with the chairs. ●



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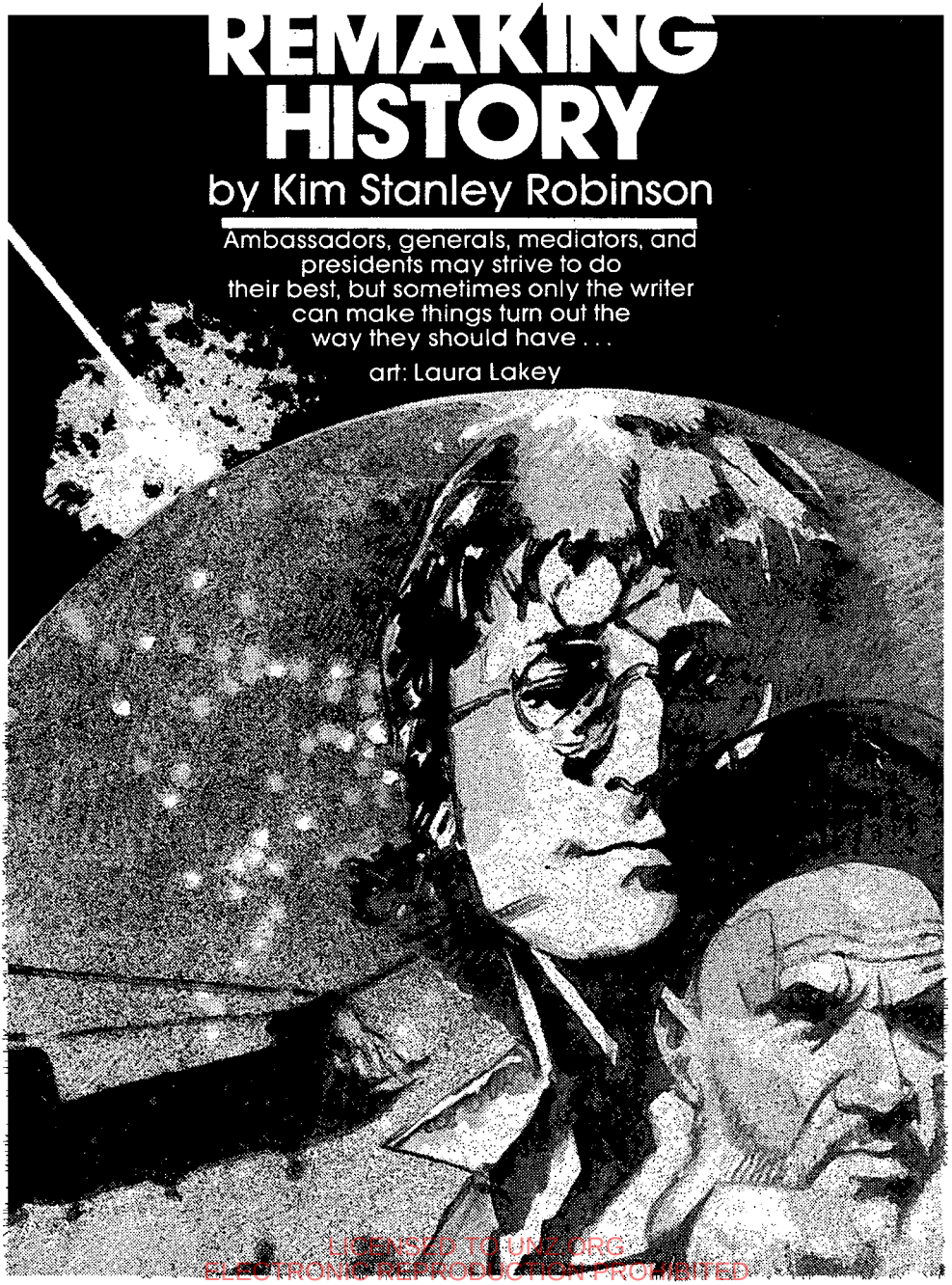
REMAKING HISTORY

by Kim Stanley Robinson

Ambassadors, generals, mediators, and presidents may strive to do their best, but sometimes only the writer can make things turn out the way they should have . . .

art: Laura Lakey



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"The point is *not* to make an exact replica of the Teheran embassy compound." Exasperated, Ivan Venutshenko grabbed his hair in one hand and pulled up, which gave him a faintly Oriental look. "It's the *spirit* of the place that we want to invoke here."

"This has the spirit of our storage warehouse, if you ask me."

"This is our storage warehouse, John. We make all our movies here."

"But I thought you said we were going to correct all the lies of the first movie," John Rand said to their director. "I thought you said *Escape From Teheran* was a dumb TV docu-drama, only worth remembering because of De Niro's performance as Colonel Jackson. We're going to get the true story on film at last, you said."

Ivan sighed. "That's right, John. Admirable memory. But what you must understand is that when making a film, *true* doesn't mean an absolute fidelity to the real."

"I'll bet that's just what the director of the docu-drama said."

Ivan hissed, which he did often while directing their films, to show that he was letting off steam, and avoiding an explosion. "Don't be obstructionist, John. We're not doing anything like that hackwork, and you know it. Lunar gravity alone makes it impossible for us to make a completely realist film. We are working in a world of dream, in a surrealist intensification of what really happened. Besides, we're doing these movies for our own entertainment up here! Remake bad historical films! Have a good time!"

"Sure, Ivan. Sure. Except the ones *you've* directed have been getting some great reviews downside, they're saying you're the new Eisenstein and these little remakes are the best thing to hit the screen since *Kane*. So now the pressure is on and it's not just a game anymore, right?"

"Wrong!" Ivan karate-chopped the air. "I refuse to believe that. When we stop having fun doing this," nearly shouting, "I quit!"

"Sure, Sergei."

"Don't call me that!"

"Okay, Orson."

"JOHN!"

"But that's *my* name. If I call you that we'll all get confused."

Melina Gourtsianis, their female lead, came to Ivan's rescue. "Come on, John, you'll give him a heart attack, and besides it's late. Let's get on with it."

Ivan calmed down, ran his hands through his hair. He loved doing his maddened director routine, and John loved maddening him. As they disagreed about nearly everything, they made a perfect team. "Fine," Ivan said. "Okay. We've got the set ready, and it may not be an *exact* replica of the compound—" fierce glare at John "—but it's good enough.

"Now, let's go through it one more time. It's night in Teheran. This

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whole quarter of the city has been gassed with a paralyzing nerve gas, but there's no way of telling when the Revolutionary Guards might come barrelling in from somewhere else with gas masks or whatever, and you can't be sure some of them haven't been protected from the gas in sealed rooms. Any moment they might jump out firing. Your helicopters are hovering just overhead, so it's tremendously noisy. There's a blackout in the compound, but searchlights from other parts of the city are beginning to pin the choppers. They've been breaking like cheap toys all the way in, so now there are only five left, and you have no assurances that they will continue to work, especially since twice that number have already broken. You're all wearing gas marks and moving through the rooms of the compound, trying to find and move all fifty-three of the hostages—it's dark and many of the hostages are knocked out like the guards, but some of the rooms were well-sealed, and naturally these hostages are shouting for help. For a while—and this is the effect I want to emphasize more than any other—for a while, things inside are absolutely chaotic. No one can find Colonel Jackson, no one knows how many of the hostages are recovered and how many still in the embassy, it's dark, it's noisy, there are shots in the distance. I want an effect like the scene at the end of *The Lady From Shanghai,* when they're in the carnival's house of mirrors shooting at each other. Multiplied by ten. Total chaos."

"Now hold on just a second here," John said, exaggerating his Texas accent, which came and went according to his convenience. "I like the chaos bit, and the allusion to Welles, but let's get back to this issue of the facts. Colonel Jackson was the hero of this whole thing! He was the one that decided to go on with all them helicopters busting out in the desert, and he was the one that found Annette Bellows in the embassy to lead them around, and all in all he was on top of every minute of it. That's why they gave him all them medals!"

Ivan glared. "What part are you playing, John?"

"Why, Colonel Jackson." John drew himself up. "Natch."

"However." Ivan tapped the side of his head, to indicate thought. "You don't just want to do a bad imitation of the De Niro performance, do you? You want to do a new interpretation, don't you? Besides it seems to me a foolish idea to try an imitation of De Niro."

"I like the idea, myself," John said. "Show him how."

Ivan waved him away. "You got all you know about this affair from that stupid TV movie, just like everyone else. I, however, have been reading the accounts of the hostages and the Marines on those helicopters, and the truth is that Colonel Jackson's best moment was out there in the desert, when he decided to go on with the mission even though only five helicopters were still functioning. That was his peak of glory,

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his moment of heroism. And you did a perfectly adequate job of conveying that when we filmed the scene. We could see every little gear in there, grinding away." He tapped his skull.

"De Niro would have been proud," Melina said.

John pursed his lips and nodded. "We need great men like that. Without them history would be dead. It'd be nothing but a bunch of broken-down helicopters out in a desert somewhere."

"A trenchant image of History," Ivan said. "Too bad Shelley got to it first. Meanwhile, the truth is that after making the decision to go on with the raid, Colonel Jackson appeared, in the words of his subordinates, somewhat stunned. When they landed on the embassy roof he led the first unit in, and when they got lost inside the whole force was effectively without leadership for most of the crucial first half-hour. All the accounts of this period describe it as the utmost chaos, saved only when Sergeant Payton—*not* Colonel Jackson—the TV movie lied about that—when Payton found Ms. Bellows, and she led them to all the hostage rooms they hadn't found."

"All right, all right." John frowned. "So I'm supposed to be kind of spaced out in this scene."

"Don't go for too deep an analysis, John, you might strain something. But essentially you have it. Having committed the force to the raid, even though you're vastly undermanned because of the damned helicopters breaking down, you're a bit frozen by the risk of it. Got that?"

"Yeah. But I don't believe it. Jackson was a hero."

"Fine, a hero, lots of medals. Roomfuls of medals. If he pinned them on he'd look like the bride after the dollar dance. He'd collapse under their weight. But now let's try showing what really happened."

"All right," John drew himself up. "I'm ready."

The shooting of the scene was the part they all enjoyed the most; this was the heart of the activity, the reason they kept making movies to occupy their free hours at Luna Three. Ivan and John and Melina and Pierre-Paul, the theoreticians who traded directing chores from project to project, always blocked the scenes very loosely, allowing a lot of room for improvisation. Thus scenes like this one, which were supposed to be chaotic, were played out with a manic gusto. They were good at chaos.

And so for nearly a half-hour they rushed about the interior of their Teheran embassy compound—the base storage warehouse, with its immense rows of boxes arranged behind white panels of plywood to resemble the compound's buildings and their interiors. Their shouts were nearly drowned by the clatter of recorded helicopters, while intermittent lights flashed in the darkness. Cut-outs representing the helicopters were pasted to the clear dome overhead, silhouetted against the unearthly

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brilliance of the stars—these last had become a trademark of Luna Three Productions, as their frequent night scenes always had these unbelievably bright stars overhead, part of the films' dreamlike effect.

The actors playing Marines bounded about the compound in their gas masks, looking like aliens descended to ravage a planet; the actors playing hostages and Revolutionary Guards lay scattered on the floor, except for a few in protected rooms, who fought or cried for help. John and Pierre-Paul and the rest hunted the compound for Melina, playing Annette Bellows, the woman who had been so crucial to finding all the hostages. For a while it looked as if John would get to her first, thus repeating the falsehood of the De Niro film. But eventually Pierre-Paul, playing Sergeant Payton, located her room, and he and his small unit rushed about after the clear-headed Bellows, who, as she wrote later, had spent most of her months in captivity planning what she should do if this moment ever came. They located the remaining comatose hostages and lugged them quickly to the plywood helicopter on the compound roof. The sound of shots punctuated the helicopters' roar, and as they leaped through the helicopter's door shafts of white light stabbed the air like Islamic swords.

That was it; the flight away would be filmed in their little helicopter interior. Ivan turned off the helicopter noise, shouted "Cut!" into a megaphone. Then he shut down all the strategically placed minicams, which had been recording every minute of it.

"What bothers me about your movies, Ivan," John said, "is that you always take away the hero. Always!"

They were standing in the shallow end of the base pool, cooling off while they watched the day's rushes on a screen filling one wall of the natatorium. Many of the screens showed much the same result; darkness, flickering light, alien shapes moving in the elongated dancelike way that audiences on earth found so surreal, so mesmerizing. There was little indication of the pulsing rhythms and wrenching suspense that Ivan's editing would create from this material. But the actors were happy, seeing arresting images of desperation, of risk, of heroism in the face of a numbingly loud confusion.

Ivan was not as pleased. "Shit!" he said. "We're going to have to do it again."

"Looks okay to me," John remarked. "Son of Film Noir Returns From the Grave. But really, Ivan, you've got to do something about this prejudice against heroes. I saw *Escape From Teheran* when I was a kid, and it was an inspiration to me. It was one of the big reasons I got into engineering."

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Pierre-Paul objected: "John, just how did seeing a commando film get you interested in engineering?"

"Well," John replied, frowning. "I thought I'd design a better helicopter, I guess." He ignored his friends' laughter. "I was pretty shocked at how unreliable they were. But the way old De Niro continued on to Teheran! The way he extricated all the hostages and got them back safely, even with the choppers dropping like flies! It was great! We need heroes, and history tells the story of the few people who had what it takes to be one. But you're always downplaying them."

"The Great Man Theory of history," Pierre-Paul said scornfully.

"Sure!" John admitted. "Great Woman too of course," nodding quickly at the frowning Melina. "It's the great leaders who make the difference. They're special people, and there aren't many of them. But if you believe Ivan's films, there aren't any at all."

With a snort of disgust Ivan took his attention from the rushes. "Hell, we are going to have to do that scene again. As for my theory of history, John, you both have it and you don't. As far as I understand you." He cocked his head and looked at his friend attentively. On the set they both played their parts to the teeth: Ivan the tormented, temperamental director, gnashing his teeth and ordering people about; John the stubborn, temperamental star, questioning everything and insisting on his preeminence. Mostly this was role-playing, part of the game, part of what made their hobby entertaining to them. Off the set the roles largely disappeared, except to make a point, or have some fun. Ivan was the base's head of computer operations, while John was an engineer involved in the Mars voyage; they were good friends, and their arguments had done much to shape Ivan's ideas for his revisionist historical films, which were certainly the ones from their little troupe making the biggest splash downside—though John claimed this was because of the suspenseful plots and the weird low-gee imagery, not because of what they were saying about history. "*Do* I understand you?" Ivan asked curiously.

"Well," John said, "take the one you did last time, about the woman who saved John Lennon's life. Now that was a perfect example of heroic action, as the 1982 docu-drama made clear. There she was standing right next to a man who had pulled out a damn big gun, and quicker than he could pull the trigger she put a foot in his crotch and a fist in his ear. But in your remake, all we concentrated on was how she had just started the karate class that taught her the moves, and how her husband encouraged her to take the class, and how that cabbie stopped for her even though she was going the other direction, and how that other cabbie told her that Lennon had just walked into his apartment lobby, and all that. You made it seem like it was just a coincidence!"

Ivan took in a mouthful of pool water and spurted it at the spangled

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dome, looking like a fountain statue. "It took a lot of coincidences to get Margaret Arvis into the Dakota lobby at the right time," he told John. "But some of them weren't coincidences—they were little acts of generosity or kindness or consideration, that put her where she could do what she did. I didn't take the heroism away. I just spread it around to all the places it belonged."

John grimaced, drew himself up into his star persona. "I suppose this is some damn commie notion of mass social movements, sweeping history along in a consensus direction."

"No no," Ivan said. "I always concentrate on individuals. What I'm saying is that all our individual actions add up to history, to the big visible acts of our so-called leaders. You know what I mean; you hear people saying all the time that things are better now because John Lennon was such a moral force, traveling everywhere, Nobel Peace Prize, secular pope, the conscience of the world or whatnot."

"Well he was the conscience of the world!"

"Sure, sure, he wrote great songs. And he got a lot of antagonists to talk. But without Margaret Arvis he would have been killed at age forty. And without Margaret Arvis's husband, and her karate instructor, and a couple cabbies in New York, and so on, she wouldn't have been there to save his life. So we all become part of it, see? The people who say it was all because of Lennon, or Carter, or Gorbachev—they're putting on a few people what we all did."

John shook his head, scattering water everywhere. "Very sophisticated, I'm sure! But in fact it was precisely Lennon and Carter and Gorbachev who made huge differences, all by themselves. Carter started the big swing toward human rights. Palestine, the new Latin America, the American Indian nations—none of those would have existed without him."

"In fact," Melina added, glancing mischievously at Pierre-Paul, "if I understand the Margaret Arvis movie correctly, if she hadn't been going to see Carter thank his New York campaign workers for the 1980 victory, she wouldn't have been in the neighborhood of the Dakota, and so she wouldn't have had the chance to save Lennon's life."

John rose up like a whale breaching. "So it's Carter we have to thank for that, too! As for Gorbachev, well, I don't have to tell you what all he did. That was a hundred-eighty degree turnaround for you Russkies, and no one can say it would have happened without him."

"Well—he was an important leader, I agree."

"Sure was! And Carter was just as crucial. Their years were the turning point, when the world started to crawl out from under the shadow of World War Two. And that was their doing. There just aren't many people who could've done it. Most of us don't have it in us."

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Ivan shook his head. "Carter wouldn't have been able to do what he did unless Colonel Ernest Jackson had saved the rescue mission to Teheran, by deciding to go on when they didn't really have enough functioning helicopters."

"So Jackson is a hero, too!"

"But then Jackson wouldn't have been a hero if the officer back in the Pentagon hadn't decided at the last minute to send sixteen helicopters instead of eight."

"And," Melina pointed out quickly, "if Annette Bellows hadn't spent most of a year day-dreaming about what she would do in a rescue attempt, so that she knew blindfolded where every other hostage was being kept. They would have left about half the hostages behind without her, and Carter wouldn't have looked so good."

"Plus they needed Sergeant Payton to find Bellows and follow her around," Ivan added.

"Well shit!" John yelled defensively, which was his retort in any tight spot. He changed tack. "I ain't so sure that Carter's re-election hinged on those hostages anyway. He was running against a flake, I can't remember the guy's name, but he was some kind of idiot."

"So?" Melina said. "Since when has that made any difference?"

With a roar John dove at her, making a big splash. She was much faster than he was, however, and she evaded him easily as he chased her around the pool; it looked like a whale chasing a dolphin. He was reduced to splashing at her from a distance, and the debate quickly degenerated into a big splash fight, as it often did.

"Oh well," John declared, giving up the attack and floating in the shallow end. "I love watching Melina swim the butterfly. In this gravity it becomes a godlike act. Those muscular arms, that sinuous dolphin motion. . . ."

Pierre-Paul snorted. "You just like the way butterfly puts her bottom above water so often."

"No way! Women are just more hydrodynamic than men, don't you think?"

"Not the way you like them."

"Godlike. Gods and goddesses."

"You look a bit godlike yourself," Melina told him. "Bacchus, for instance."

"Hey." John waved her off, jabbed a finger at the screens. "I note that all this mucho sophisticated European theorizing has been sunk. Took a bit of Texas logic is all."

"Only Texas logic could do it," Pierre-Paul said.

"Right. You admit my point. In the end it's the great leaders who have to act, the rare ones, no matter if we ordinary folks help them into power."

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"When you revise your proposition like that," Ivan said, "you turn it into mine. Leaders are important, but they are leaders because we made them leaders. They are a collective phenomenon. They are expressions of us."

"Now wait just a minute! You're going over the line again! You're talking like heroic leaders are a dime a dozen, but if that were true it wouldn't matter if Carter had lost in 1980, or if Lennon had been killed by that guy. But look at history, man! Look what happened when we did lose great leaders! Lincoln was shot, did they come up with another leader comparable to him? No way! Same with Gandhi, and the Kennedys, and King, and Sadat, and Olof Palme. When those folks were killed their countries suffered the lack of them, because they were special."

"They were special," Ivan agreed, "and obviously it was a bad thing they were killed. And no doubt there was a short-term change for the worse. But they're not irreplaceable, because they're human beings just like us. None of them, except maybe Lincoln or Gandhi, was any kind of genius or saint. It's only afterwards we think of them that way, because we want heroes so much. But we're the heroes. All of us put them in place. And there are a lot of capable, brilliant people out there to replace the loss of them, so that in the long run we recover."

"The *real* long run," John said darkly. "A hundred years or more, for the South without Lincoln. They just aren't that common. The long run proves it."

"Speaking of the long run," Pierre-Paul said, "is anyone getting hungry?"

They all were; the rushes were over, and Ivan had dismissed them as unusable; they climbed out of the pool and walked toward the changing room, discussing restaurants. There were a considerable number of them in the station, and new ones were opening every week. "I just tried the new Hungarian restaurant," Melina said. "The food was good, but we had trouble when the meal was over, finding someone to give us the check!"

"I thought you said it was a Hungarian restaurant," John said.

They threw him back in the pool.

The second time they ran through the rescue scene in the compound, Ivan had repositioned most of the minicams, and many of the lights; his instructions to the actors remained the same. But once inside the hallways of the set, John Rand couldn't help hurrying in the general direction of Annette Bellows' room.

All right, he thought. Maybe Colonel Jackson had been a bit hasty to rush into the compound in search of hostages, leaving the group without

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a commander. But his heart had been in the right place, and the truth was, he had found a lot of the hostages without any help from Bellows at all. It was easy; they were scattered in ones and twos on the floor of almost every room he and his commandos entered, and stretched out along with the guards in the rooms and in the halls, paralyzed by the nerve gas. Damn good idea, that nerve gas. Guards and hostages, tough parts to play, no doubt, as they were getting kicked pretty frequently by commandos running by. He hustled his crew into room after room, then sent them off with hostages draped over their shoulders, pretending to stagger down the halls, banging into walls—*really* tough part to play, hostage—and clutching at gas masks and such; great images for the minicams, no doubt about it.

When all his commandos had been sent back, he ran around a corner in what he believed to be the direction of Annette Bellows' room. Over the racket of the helicopters, and the occasional round of automatic fire, he thought he could make out Melina's voice, shouting hoarsely. So Pierre-Paul hadn't gotten to her yet. Good. Now he could find her and be the one to follow her around rescuing the more obscurely housed hostages, just as De Niro had in the docu-drama. It would give Ivan fits, but they could argue it out afterwards. No way of telling what really happened in that compound thirty years before, after all; and it made a better *story* his way.

Their set was only one story tall, which was one of the things that John had objected to; the compound in Teheran had been four stories high, and getting up stairs had been part of the hassle. But Ivan was going to play with the images and shoot a few stair scenes later on, to achieve the effect of multiple floors. Fine, it meant he had only to struggle around a couple of narrow corners, jumping comatose Revolutionary Guards, looking fierce for the minicams wherever they were. It was really loud this time around; *really* loud.

Then one of the walls fell over on him, the plywood pinning him to the ground, the boxes behind it tumbling down and filling the hallway. "Hey!" he cried out, shocked. This wasn't the way it had happened. What was going on? The noise of the helicopters cut off abruptly, replaced by a series of crashes, a whooshing sound. That sound put a fine electric thrill down his spine; he had heard it before, in training routines. Air leaving the chamber. The dome must have been breached.

He heaved up against the plywood. Stuck. Flattening himself as much as possible he slithered forward, under the plywood and out into a small space among fallen boxes. Hard to tell where the hallway had been, and it was pitch dark. There wouldn't be too much time left. He thought of his little gas mask, then cursed; it wasn't connected to a real oxygen supply. That's what comes from using fake props! he thought angrily. A

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gas mask with nothing attached to it. Open to the air, which was departing rapidly. Not much time.

He found room among the boxes to stand, and he was about to run over them to the door leading out of the warehouse—assuming the whole station hadn't been breached—when he remembered Melina. Stuck in her embassy room down the hall, wouldn't she still be there? Hell. He groped along in the dark, hearing shouts in the distance. Lights, too. Good. He was holding his breath, for what felt like minutes at a time, though it was probably less than thirty seconds. Every time he heaved in a new breath he expected it to be freezing vacuum, but the supply of rushing, cold—very cold—air continued to fill him. Emergency supply pouring out into the breach, actually a technique he had helped develop himself. Seemed to be working, at least for the moment.

He heard a muffled cry to one side, began to pull at the boxes before him. Squeak in the gloom, ah ha, there she was. Not fully conscious. Legs wet, probably blood, uh oh. He pulled hard at boxes, lifted her up. Adrenalin and lunar gravity made him feel like Superman with that part of things, but there didn't seem to be anywhere near as much air as before, and what was left was damned cold. Hurt to breathe. And harder than hell to balance as he hopped over objects with Melina in his arms. Feeling faint, he climbed over a row of boxes and staggered toward a distant light. A sheet of plywood smacked his shin and he cried out, then fell over. "Hey," he said. The air was gone.

When he came to he was lying in a bed in the station hospital. "Great," he muttered. "Whole station wasn't blown up."

His friends laughed, relieved to hear him speak. The whole film crew was in there, it seemed. Ivan, standing next to the bed, said "It's okay."

"What the hell happened?"

"A small meteor, apparently. Hit out in our sector, in the shuttle landing chambers ironically. But it wrecked our storage space as well, as you no doubt noticed."

John nodded painfully. "So it finally happened."

"Yes." This was one of the great uncontrollable dangers of the lunar stations; meteors small and large were still crashing down onto the moon's airless surface, by the thousands every year. Odds were poor that any one would hit something as small as the surface parts of their station, but coming down in such numbers. . . . in the long run they were reduced to a safety status somewhat equivalent to that of mountain climbers; rockfall could always get you.

"Melina?" John said, jerking up in his bed.

"Over here," Melina called. She was a few beds down, and had one leg

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in a cast. "I'm fine, John." She got out of bed to prove it, and came over to kiss his cheek. "Thanks for the rescue!"

John snorted. "What rescue?"

They laughed again at him. Pierre-Paul pointed a forefinger at him. "There are heroes everywhere, even among the lowest of us. Now you have to admit Ivan's argument."

"The hell I do."

"You're a hero," Ivan said to him, grinning. "Just an ordinary man, so to speak. Not one of the great leaders at all. But by saving Melina, you've changed history."

"Not unless she becomes president," John said, and laughed. "Hey Melina! Go out and run for office! Or save some promising songwriter or something."

Ivan just shook his head. "Why are you so stubborn? It's not so bad if I'm right, John. Think about it—if I am right, then we aren't just sitting around waiting for leaders to guide us." A big grin lit his face: "We become the masters of our fate, we make our own decisions and act on them—we choose our leaders, and instruct them by consensus, so that we can take history any direction we please! Just as you did in the warehouse."

John lay back in his bed and was silent. Around him his friends grinned; one of them was bringing up a big papier-maché medal, which vaguely resembled the one the Wizard of Oz pins to the Cowardly Lion. "Ah hell," John said.

"When the expedition reaches Mars, they'll have to name something after you," Melina said.

John thought about it for a while. He took the big medal, held it limply. His friends watched him, waiting for him to speak.

"Well, I still say it's bullshit," he told Ivan. "But if there is any truth to what you say, it's just the good old spirit of the Alamo you're talking about anyway. We've been doing it like that in Texas for years."

They laughed at him.

He rose up from the bed again, swung the medal at them furiously. "I swear it's true! Besides it's all Robert De Niro's fault anyway! I was *imitating* the real heroes, don't you see? I was crawling around in there all dazed, and then I saw De Niro's face when he was playing Colonel Jackson in the Teheran embassy, and I said to myself, well hell, what would he have done in this here situation? And that's just what I did." ●

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IN ANOTHER COUNTRY: INTRODUCTION

by Robert Silverberg

Writing "In Another Country" was one of the strangest and most challenging things I've done in my thirty-five years of professional writing.

The impetus to do it came from the anthologist Martin H. Greenberg, who told me one wintry day in early 1988 that he was editing a series of books for which contemporary science fiction writers would be asked to produce companions to classic SF novellas of the past. The new story and the old one would then be published in the same volume. He invited me to participate; and after hardly a moment's thought I chose C.L. Moore's "Vintage Season" as the story I most wanted to work with.

Now and then I have deliberately chosen to reconstruct some classic work of literature in a science-fictional mode, as a kind of technical exercise. My novel *The Man in the Maze* of twenty years ago is based on the "Philoctetes" of Sophocles, for example, though you'd have to look hard to find the parallel. *Downward to the Earth,* about the same time, was written with a nod to Joseph Conrad's "Heart of Darkness." My story "To See the Invisible Man" develops an idea that Jorge Luis Borges threw away in a single sentence. Just last year I reworked Conrad's famous story "The Secret Sharer," translating it completely into an SF context.

But in all those cases, though I was using the themes and patterns of earlier and greater writers, the stories themselves, and the worlds in which they were set, were entirely my own inventions. Essentially I was running my own variations on classic themes, as Beethoven did with themes of Mozart, or Brahms with Haydn. The task this time was to

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enter a world already created by a master artist—the world of Moore's classic 1946 story, "Vintage Season"—and work with *her material,* finding something new to say about a narrative situation that had already been triumphantly, and, one would think, completely, explored in great depth.

The solution was not to write a sequel to "Vintage Season"—that would have been pointless, a mere time-travelog to some other era—but to produce a work interwoven with hers the way the lining of a cape is interwoven with the cape itself. My story is set during the same few weeks as hers, and builds toward the same climax. I used many of her characters, but not as major figures; they move through the background, and the people in the foreground are mine. She told her story from the point of view of a man of the twentieth century who finds himself in the midst of perplexing strangers from the future; I went around to the far side, and worked from the point of view of one of the visitors. Where I could, I filled in details of the time-traveling future society that she had not provided, and clarified aspects of her story that she had chosen to leave undeveloped, thus providing a kind of Silverbergian commentary on Moore's concepts. And though I made no real attempt to write in Moore's style, I adapted my own as well as I could to match the grace and elegance of her tone.

There is an aspect of real *lèse-majesté* in all of this, or perhaps the word I want is *hubris.* Readers of my autobiographical anthology, *Robert Silverberg's Worlds of Wonder,* will know that C.L. Moore is one of the writers I most revere in our field, and that I have studied her work with respect verging on awe. To find myself now going back over the substance of her most accomplished story in the hope of adding something to it of my own was an odd and almost frightening experience. I suspect I would not have dared to do any such thing fifteen or twenty years ago, confident though I was then of my own technical abilities. But now, when my own science-fiction-writing career has extended through a period actually longer than that of Moore's own, I found myself willing to risk the attempt, if only to see whether I could bring it off.

It was an extraordinary thing for me to enter Moore's world and feel, for the weeks I was at work, that I was actually writing, if not "Vintage Season," then something as close to it as could be imagined. I was there, in that city, at that time, and it all became far more vivid for me than even my many readings of the original story over a forty-year period had been able to achieve. I hope that the result justifies the effort and that I will be forgiven for having dared to tinker with a masterpiece in this way. And most profoundly do I wish that C.L. Moore could have seen my work and perhaps found a good word or two to say for it.

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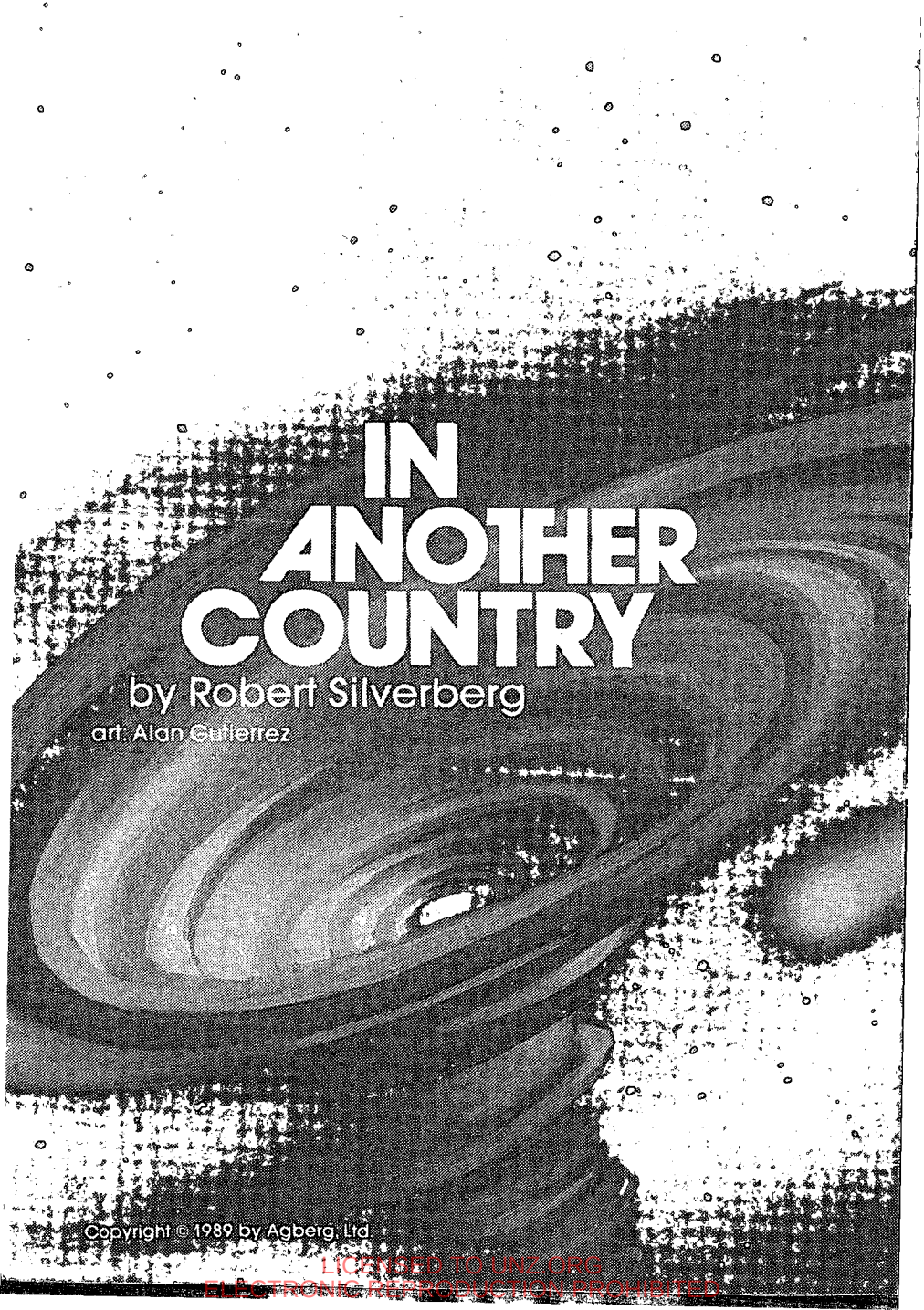

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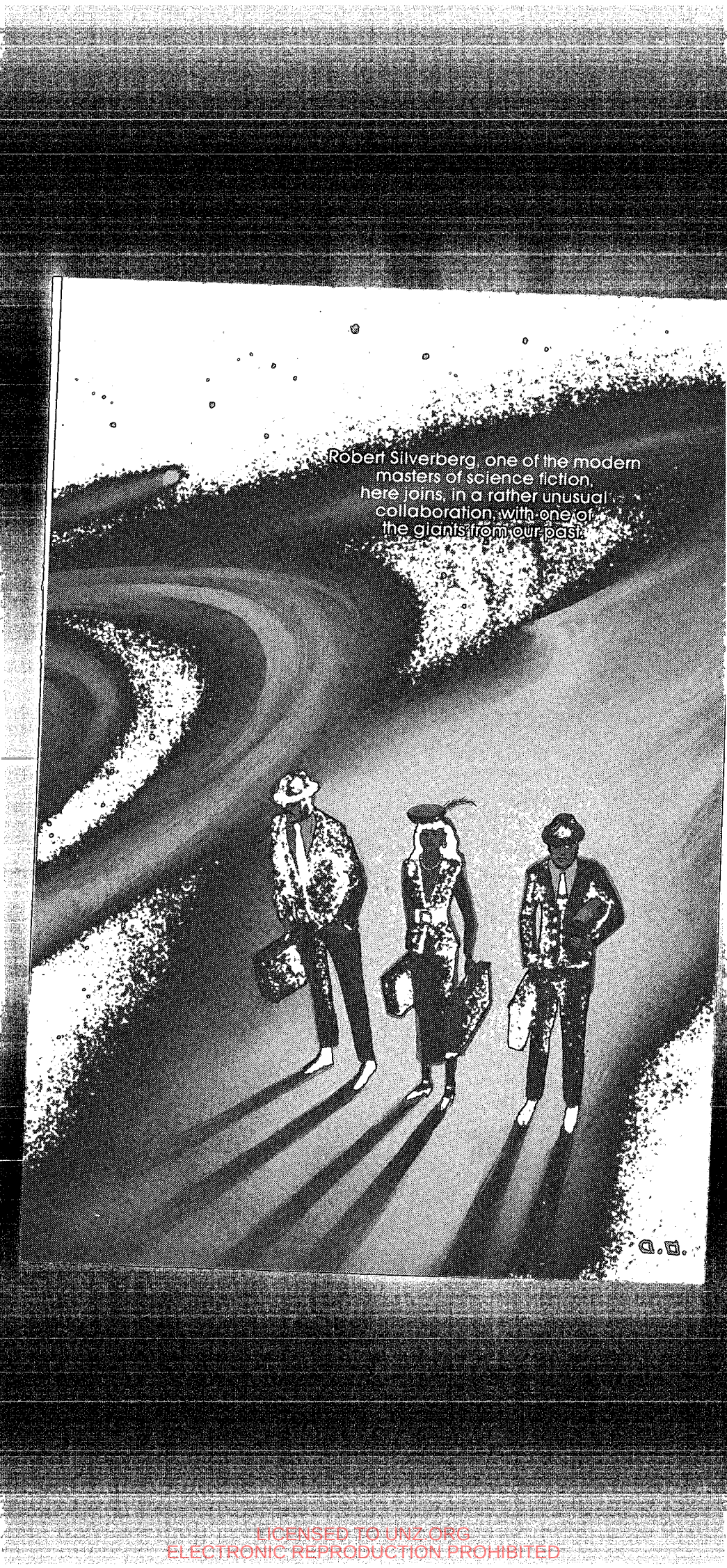
Robert Silverberg, one of the modern masters of science fiction, here joins, in a rather unusual collaboration, with one of the giants from our past.

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The summer had been Capri, at the villa of Augustus, the high summer of the emperor at the peak of his reign, and the autumn had been the pilgrimage to golden Canterbury. Later they would all go to Rome for Christmas, to see the coronation of Charlemagne. But now it was the springtime of their wondrous journey, that glorious May late in the twentieth century that was destined to end in sudden roaring death and a red smoking sky. In wonder and something almost like ecstasy Thimiroi watched the stone walls of Canterbury fade into mist and this newest strange city take on solidity around him. The sight of it woke half-formed poems in his mind. He felt amazingly young, alive, open . . . vulnerable.

"Thimiroi's in a trance," Denvin said in his light, mocking way, and winked and grinned. He stood leaning casually against the rail of the embankment, a compact, elegant little man, looking back at his two companions.

"Let him alone," said Laliene sharply. In anger she ran her hands over the crimson nimbus of her hair and down the sides of her sleek tanned cheeks. Her gray-violet eyes flashed with annoyance. "Can't you see he's overwhelmed by what he sees out there?"

"By the monstrous ugliness of it?"

"By its beauty," Laliene said, with some ferocity. She touched Thimiroi's elbow. "Are you all right?" she whispered.

Thimiroi nodded.

She gestured toward the city. "How wonderfully discordant it is! How beautifully strident! No two buildings alike. And the surfaces of everything so flat. But colors, shapes, sizes, textures, all different. Not even the trees showing any sort of harmony."

"And the noise," said Denvin. "Don't forget the noise, if you're delighted by discordance. Machinery screeching and clanging and booming, and giving off smelly fumes besides—oh, it's marvelous, Laliene! Those painted things are vehicles, aren't they? Those boxy-looking machines. Honking and bellowing like crazed oxen with wheels. That thing flying around up there, too, the shining thing with wings—listen to it! Just listen!"

"Stop it," Laliene said. "You're going to upset him."

"No," Thimiroi said. "He's not bothering me. But I do think it's very beautiful. Beautiful in its ugliness. Beautiful in its discordance. There's energy here. Whatever else this place may be, it's a place of tremendous energy. And energy is always beautiful." His heart was pounding. It had not pounded like this when they had arrived at any of the other places of their tour through antiquity. But the twentieth century was special: an apocalyptic time, a time of such potent darkness that it cast an eerie black radiance across half a dozen centuries to come. And this was its most poignant moment, when the century was at its highest point, all

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its earlier turmoil far behind—the moment when splendor and magnificence would be transformed in an instant, by nature's malevolent prank, into stunning catastrophe. "Besides," he said, "not everything here is ugly or discordant anyway. Look at the sky."

"Yes," Laliene said. "That's a sky to remember. It's a sky that absolutely demands a great artist to capture, wouldn't you say? Someone on the order of Nivander, or even Sathimon. Those blues, and the white of the clouds. And then those streaks of gold and purple and red."

"You mean the pollution?" Denvin asked.

She glowered at him. "Don't. Please. If you don't want to be here, tell Kadro when he shows up, and he'll send you home. But don't spoil it for the rest of us."

"Sorry," said Denvin, in a chastened tone. "I do have to admit that that sky is fantastic."

"So intense," Laliene said. "It comes right down and wraps itself around the tops of the buildings like a shimmering blue cloak. And everything so sharp, so vivid, so clear. The sun was brighter back in these days, someone said. That must be why. And the air more transparent, a different mix of elements. Of course, this was an unusual season even for here. That's well known. They say there had never been a month like this one, a magical springtime, everything perfect, almost as if it had been arranged that way for maximum contrast with—with—"

Her voice trailed away.

Thimiroi shook his head. "You both talk too much. Can't you simply stand here and let it all come flooding into your souls? We came here to *experience* this place, not to talk about it. We'll have the rest of our lives to talk about it."

They looked abashed. He grasped their hands in his and laughed—his rich, exuberant, pealing laugh, which some people thought was too much for their delicate sensibilities—to take the sting out of the rebuke. Denvin, after a moment, managed a smile. Laliene gave Thimiroi a curiously impenetrable stare; but then she, too, smiled, a warmer and more sincere one than Denvin's. Thimiroi nodded and released them, and stepped forward to peer over the edge of the embankment.

They had materialized just a few moments earlier, in what seemed to be a park on the highest slopes of a lush green hillside overlooking a broad, swiftly flowing river. The city was on the far side, stretching out before them in dizzying vastness. Where they stood was in a sort of overlook point, jutting out of the hill, protected by a dark metal railing. Their luggage was beside them. The hour appeared to be midday; the sun was high; the air was mild, and very still and clear. The park was almost empty, though Thimiroi could see a few people strolling on the paths below. Natives of this time and place, he thought. His heart went

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out to them. He would have run down to them and embraced them, if he could. He longed to know what they were really like, these ancients, these rough earthy primitives, these people of lost antiquity.

Primitives, he thought? Well, yes, what else could they be called? They lived so long ago. But this city is no trifling thing. This is no squalid village of mud-and-wattle huts that lies before us.

In silence Thimiroi stared across the river at the massive blocky gray towers and wide, busy streets of the great metropolis, and at the shimmering silvery bridges to his right and to his left, and at the endless rows of small white and pink houses that rose up and up and up through the green hills on the other side. The weight and size and power of the place were extraordinary. His soul quivered with—what? Joy? Amazement? Fear?—at such immensity. How many people lived here? A million? Five million? He could scarcely conceive of such a number, all packed into a single place. The other ancient cities they had visited on this tour, imperial capitals though they were, were mere citylets—towns, even; piddling little medieval settlements—however grand they might have imagined themselves to be. But the great cities of the twentieth century, he had always been told, marked the high point in human urban concentration: cities of ten million, fifteen million, twenty million people. Unimaginable. This one before him was not even the biggest one, not even close to the biggest. Never before in history had cities grown to this size—and never again, either. Never again. What an extraordinary sight! What an astounding thing to contemplate, this great humming throbbing hive of intense human activity, especially when one knew—when one knew——when one knew the fate that was soon to befall it—

"Thimiroi?" Laliene called. "Kadro's here!"

He turned. The tour leader, a small, fragile-looking man with thick flame-red hair and eerie blue-violet eyes, held out his arms to them. He could only just have arrived himself—they had all been together mere minutes before, in Canterbury—but he was dressed already in twentieth-century costume, curious and quaint and awkward-looking, but oddly elegant on him. Thimiroi had no idea how that trick had been accomplished, but he accepted it untroubledly: The Travel was full of mysteries of all sorts, detours and overlaps and side-jaunts through time. It was Kadro's business to understand such things, not his.

"You'd better change," Kadro said. "There's a transport vehicle on the way up here to take you into town."

He touched something at his hip and a cloud of dark mist sprang up around them. Under its protective cover they opened their suitcases—their twentieth-century clothes were waiting neatly inside, and some of the strange local currency—and set about the task of making themselves look like natives.

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"Oh, how wonderful!" Laliene cried, holding a gleaming, iridescent green robe in front of herself and dancing around with it. "How did they think of such things? Look at how it's cut! Look at the way it's fitted together!"

"I've seen you wearing a thousand things more lovely than those," said Denvin sourly.

She made a face at him. Denvin himself had almost finished changing: he was clad now in gray trousers, scarlet shirt open at the throat, charcoal-colored jacket cut with flaring lapels. Like Kadro, he looked splendid in his costume. But Kadro and Denvin looked splendid in anything they wore. The two of them were men of the same sort, Thimiroi thought, both of them dandyish, almost dainty. Perfect men of fashion. He himself, much taller than they and very muscular, almost rawboned, had never quite mastered their knack of seeming at utter ease in all situations. He often felt out of place among such smooth types as they, almost as though he were some sort of throwback, full of hot, primordial passions and drives rarely seen in the refined era into which he had happened to be born. It was, perhaps, his creative intensity, he often thought. His artistic nature. He was too earthy for them, too robust of spirit, too much the primitive. As he slipped into his twentieth-century clothes, the tight yellow pants, the white shirt boldly striped in blue, the jet-black jacket, the tapering black boots, he felt a curious sense of having returned home at last, after a long journey.

"Here comes the car," Kadro said. "Hold out your hands, quickly! I have your implants."

Thimiroi extended his arm. Something silvery-bright, like a tiny gleaming beetle, sparkled between two of Kadro's fingers. He pressed it gently against Thimiroi's skin, just above the long rosy scar of the inoculation, and it made the tiniest of whirring sounds.

"This is their language," said Kadro. He touched it to Denvin's arm also, and to Laliene's. "And this one, the technology and social customs. And this is your medical booster, just in case." Buzz, buzz, buzz. Kadro smiled. He was very efficient. "You're all ready for the twentieth century now. And just in time, too.

A vehicle had pulled up in the roadway behind them, yellow with black markings, and odd projections on its roof. Thimiroi felt a quick faint stab of nausea as a breeze, suddenly stirring out of the quiescent air, swept a whiff of the vehicle's greasy fumes past his face.

The driver hopped out. He was very big, bigger even than Thimiroi, with immense heavy shoulders and a massive column of a neck. His face was unusual, the lips strongly pronounced, the cheekbones broad and jutting like blades. His hair was black and woolly and grew very close to his skull. But the most surprising thing about him was the color of

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his skin. It was dark brown, almost black: his eyes were bright as beacons against that astonishing chocolate-hued backdrop. Thimiroi had never imagined that anyone might have skin of such a color. Was that what they all were like in the twentieth century? Skin the color of night? No one on Capri had looked like that, or in Canterbury.

"You the people called for a taxi?" the driver asked. "Here—let me put those suitcases in the trunk—"

Perhaps it is a form of ornamentation, Thimiroi thought. They have it artificially done. They think it makes them look more beautiful when they change their skins, when they change their faces, so that they are like this.

And it *was* beautiful. There was a brooding somber power about this black man's face. He was like something carved from a block of some precious and recalcitrant stone.

"I'll ride up front," Kadro said. "You three get in back." He turned to the driver. "The Montgomery House is where we are going. You know where that is?"

The driver laughed. "Ain't no one in town who don't know the Montgomery House. But you sure you don't want a hotel that's a little cheaper?"

"The Montgomery House will do," said Kadro.

They had ridden in mule-drawn carts on the narrow winding paths of hilly Capri, and in wagons drawn by oxen on the rutted road to Canterbury. That had been charming and pretty, to ride in such things, to feel the jouncing of the wheels and see the sweat glistening on the backs of the panting animals. There was nothing charming or pretty about traveling in this squat glass-walled wheeled vehicle, this *taxi*. It rumbled and quivered as if it were about to explode. It careened alarmingly around the sharp curves of the road, threatening at any moment to break free of the driver's tenuous control and go spurting over the edge of the embankment in a cataclysmic dive through space. It poured forth all manner of dark noxious gases. It was an altogether terrifying thing.

And yet fascinating and wonderful. Crude and scary though the taxi was, it was not really very different in fundamental concept or design from the silent, flawless vehicles of Thimiroi's world. Contemplating that, Thimiroi had a keen sense of the kinship of this world to his own. We are not that far beyond them in time, he thought. They exist at the edge of the modern era, really. The Capri of the Romans, the Canterbury of the pilgrimage—those are truly alien places, set deep back in the pretechnological past. But there is not the same qualitative difference between our epoch and this twentieth century. The gulf is not so great. The

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seeds of our world can be found in theirs. Or so it seems to me, Thimiroi told himself, after five minutes' acquaintance with this place.

Kadro said, "Omerie and Kleph and Klia are here already. They've rented a house just down the street from the hotel where you'll be staying."

Laliene smiled. "The Sanciscos! Oh, how I look forward to seeing them again! Omerie is such a clever man. And Kleph and Klia—how beautiful they are, how refreshing to spend time with them!"

"The place they've taken is absolutely perfect for the end of the month," said Kadro. "The view will be supreme. Hollia and Hara wanted to buy it, you know. But Omerie got to it ahead of them."

"Hollia and Hara are going to be here?" Denvin said, sounding surprised.

"*Everyone* will be here. Who would miss it?" Kadro's hands moved in a quick playful gesture of malicious pleasure. "Hollia was beside herself, of course. She couldn't believe that Omerie had beaten her to that house. But, as you say, Laliene, Omerie is such a clever man."

"Hollia is ruthless," said Denvin. "If the place is that good, she'll try to get it away from the Sanciscos. Mark my words, Kadro. She'll try some slippery little trick."

"She may very well. Not that there's any real reason to. I understand that the Sanciscos are planning to invite all of us to watch the show from their front window. Including Hollia and Hara, naturally. So they won't be the worse for it. Except that Hollia would have preferred to be the hostess herself. Cenbe will be coming, you know."

"Cenbe!" Laliene cried.

"Exactly. To finish his symphony. Hollia would have wanted to preside over that. And instead it will be Omerie's party, and Kleph's and Klia's, and she'll just be one of the crowd." Kadro giggled. "Dear Hollia. My heart goes out to her."

"Dear Hollia," Denvin echoed.

"Look there," said Thimiroi, pointing out the side window of the taxi. He spoke brusquely, his voice deliberately rough. All this gossipy chatter bored and maddened him. Who cared whether it was Hollia who gave the party, or the Sanciscos, or the Emperor Augustus himself? What mattered was the event that was coming. The experience. The awesome, wondrous, shattering calamity. "Isn't that Lutheena across the street?" he asked.

They had emerged from the park, had descended to the bank of the river, were passing through a district of venerable-looking three-story wooden houses. One of the bridges was just ahead of them, and the towers of the downtown section rose like huge stone palisades on the other side of the river. Now they were halted at an intersection, waiting for the

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colored lights that governed the flow of traffic to change; and in the group of pedestrians waiting also to cross was an unmistakably regal figure—yes, it was Lutheena, who else could it be but Lutheena?—who stood among the twentieth-century folk like a goddess among mortals. The difference was not so much in her clothes, which were scarcely distinguishable from the street clothes of the people around her, nor in her features or her hair, perfect and flawless though they were, as in the way she bore herself: for though she was slender and of a porcelain frailty, and no more than ordinary in height, she held herself with such self-contained majesty, such imperious grace, that she seemed to tower above the others, coarse and clumsy with a thick-ankled peasant cloddishness about them, who waited alongside her.

"I thought she was coming here *after* Charlemagne," Denvin said. "And then going on to Canterbury."

Thimiroi frowned. What was he talking about? Whether she came here first and then went to Canterbury, or journeyed from Canterbury to here as they had done, would they not all be here at the same time? He would never understand these things. This was another of the baffling complexities of The Travel. Surely there was only one May like this one, and one 1347 November, and one 800 December? Though everyone seemed to make the tour in some private order of his own, some going through the four seasons in the natural succession, others hopping about as they pleased, certainly they must all converge on the same point in time at once—was that not so?—

"Perhaps it's someone else," he suggested uneasily.

"But of *course* that's Lutheena," said Laliene. "I wonder what she's doing all the way out here by herself."

"Lutheena is like that," Denvin pointed out.

"Yes," Laliene said. "She is, yes." She rapped on the window. Lutheena turned, and stared gravely, and after a moment burst into that incandescent smile of hers, though her luminous eyes remained mysteriously solemn. Then the traffic light changed, the taxi moved forward, Lutheena was lost in the distance. In a few minutes they were on the bridge, and then passing through the heart of the city, alive in all its awesome afternoon clangor, and then upward, up into the hills, up to the lofty street, green with the tender new growth of this heartbreakingly perfect springtime, where they would all wait out that glorious skein of May days that lay between this moment and the terrible hour of doom's arrival.

After the straw-filled mattresses and rank smells of the lodges along the way to Canterbury, and the sweltering musty splendors of their

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whitewashed villas on the crest of Capri, the Montgomery House was almost palatial.

The rooms had a curious stiffness and angularity about them that Thimiroi was already beginning to associate with twentieth-century architecture in general, and of course there was no sweep-damping, no mood insulation, no gravity gradients, none of the little things that one took for granted when one was in one's own era. All the same, everything seemed comfortable in its way, and with the proper modifications he knew he would have no trouble feeling at home here. The rooms were spacious, the ceilings were high, the windows were clean, no odors invaded from neighboring chambers. There was indoor plumbing: a blessing, after Canterbury. He had a suite of three rooms, furnished in the strange but pleasant late-twentieth-century way that he had seen in museums. There was a box in the main sitting-room that broadcast images in color, flat ones, with no sensory augmentation other than sonics. There were paintings on the wall, maddeningly motionless. The walls themselves were painted—how remarkable!—with some thick substance so porous that he could almost make out its molecular structure if he looked closely.

Laliene's suite was down the hall from his; Denvin was on a different floor. That struck him as odd. He had assumed they were lovers and would be sharing accommodations. But, he reflected, it was always risky to assume things like that.

Thimiroi spent an hour transforming his rooms into a more familiar and congenial environment. From his suitcase he drew carpeting and draperies and coverlets of his own time, all of them supple with life and magic, to replace the harsh, flat, dead ones that they seemed to prefer here. He pulled out the three little tripod tables of fine, intricately worked Sipulva marquetry that went with him everywhere: he would read at the golden one, sip his euphoriac at the copper-hued one, write his poetry at the one that was woven in scarlet and amber. He hung an esthetikon on the wall opposite the window and set it going, filling the room with warm, throbbing color. He set a music sphere on the dresser. To provide some variation in psychological tonality he activated a little subsonic that he had carried with him, adjusting it to travel through the entire spectrum of positive moods over a twenty-four hour span, from *anticipation* through *excitation* to *culmination* in imperceptible gradations. Then he stood back, surveying the results, and nodded. That would do for now. The room had been made amiable; the room was *civilized* now. He could bring out other things later. The suitcase was infinitely capacious. All it was, after all, was a pipeline to his own era. At the far end they would put anything in it that he might requisition.

Now at last he could begin to explore the city.

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That evening they were supposed to go to a concert. Denvin had arranged it; Denvin was going to take care of all the cultural events. The legendary young violinist Sandra di Santis was playing, in what would turn out to be her final performance, though of course no one of this era could know that yet. But that was hours away. It was still only early afternoon. He would go out—he would savor the sights, the sounds, the smells of this place—

He felt just a moment of hesitation.

But why? Why? He had wandered by himself, unafraid, through the trash-strewn alleys of medieval Canterbury, though he knew that cutthroats and roisterers lurked everywhere. He had scrambled alone across the steep gullied cliffs of Capri, looking down without fear at the blue rock-rimmed Mediterranean, far below, into which a single misstep could plunge him. What was there to be cautious about here? The noisy cars racing so swiftly through the streets, perhaps. But surely a little caution and common sense would keep him from harm. If Lutheena had been out by herself, why not he? But still—still, that nagging uneasiness—

Thimiroi shrugged and left his room, and made his way down the hall to the elevator, and descended to the lobby.

At every stage of his departure wave upon wave of unsettling strangeness assailed him. The simplest act was a challenge. He had to call upon the resources of his technology implant in order to operate the lock of his room door, to summon the elevator, to tell it to take him to the lobby. But he met each of these minor mysteries in turn with a growing sense of accomplishment. By the time he reached the lobby he was moving boldly and confidently, feeling almost at home in this strange land, this unfamiliar country, that was the past.

The lobby, which Thimiroi had seen only briefly when he had arrived, was a somber, cavernous place, intricately divided into any number of smaller open chambers. He studied, as he walked calmly through it toward the brightness at the far end, the paintings, the furnishings, the things on display. Everything had that odd stiffness of form and flatness of texture that seemed to be the rule in this era: nothing appeared to have any inner life or movement. Was that how they had really liked it to be? Or was this curious deadness merely a function of the limitations of their materials? Probably some of each, Thimiroi decided. These were an artful, sophisticated folk. Of course, he thought, they had not had the advantage of many of our modern materials and devices. All the same, they would not have made everything so drab unless their esthetic saw beauty in the drabness. He would have to examine that possibility more deeply as this month went along, studying everything with an artist's shrewd and sympathetic eye, not interested in finding fault, only in understanding.

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People were standing about here and there in the lobby, mainly in twos and threes, talking quietly. They paid no attention to him. Most of them, he noticed, had fair skin much like his own. A few, Thimiroi saw, were black-skinned like the taxi driver, but others had skin of still another unusual tone, a kind of pale olive or light yellow, and their features too were unusual, very delicate, with an odd tilt to the eyes.

Once again he wondered if this skin-toning might be some sort of cosmetic alteration: but no, no, this time he queried his implant and it told him that in fact in this era there had been several different races of humanity, varying widely in physical appearance.

How lovely, Thimiroi thought. How sad for us that we are all so much alike. Another point for further research: had these black and yellow people, and the other unusual races, been swept away by the great calamity, or was it rather that all mankind had tended toward a uniformity of traits as the centuries went by? Again, perhaps, some of each. Whatever the reason, it was a cause for regret.

He reached the grand doorway that led to the street. A woman said, entering the hotel just as he was leaving it, "How I hate going indoors in weather like this!"

Her companion laughed. "Who doesn't? Can it last much longer, I wonder?"

Thimiroi stepped past them, into the splendor of the soft golden sunlight.

The air was miraculous: amazingly transparent, clear with a limpidity almost beyond belief, despite all the astonishing impurities that Thimiroi knew were routinely poured into it by the unthinking people of this era. It was as though for the long blessed moment of this one last magnificent May all the ordinary rules of nature had been suspended, and the atmosphere had become invulnerable to harm. Beyond that sublime zone of clarity rose the blue shield of the sky, pulsingly brilliant; and from its throne high in the distance the sun sent forth a tranquil, steady radiance that was like no sunlight Thimiroi had ever seen. Small wonder that those who had planned the tour had chosen this time and this place to be the epitome of springtime, he thought. There might never have been such beauty before. There might never be again.

He turned to his left and began to walk, hardly knowing or caring where he might be going.

From all sides came powerful sensory signals: the honking of horns, the sharp scent of something cooking nearby, the subtler fragrance of the light breeze. Great gray buildings soared far into the dazzling sky. Billboards and posters blared their messages in twenty colors. The impact was immediate and profound. Thimiroi beheld everything in wonder and joy.

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What richness! What complexity!

And yet there was a paradox here. What he took to be complexity in this street scene was really only a studied lack of harmony. As it had in the hotel lobby, a second glance revealed the true essence of this world's vocabulary of design: a curious rough-hewn plainness, even a severity, that made clear to him how far in the past he actually was. The extraordinary May light seemed to dance along the rooftops, giving the buildings an intricacy of texture they did not in fact possess. These ancient styles were fundamentally simple and harsh, and could all too easily be taken to be primitive and crude. In Thimiroi's own era every surface vibrated in at least half a dozen different ways, throbbing and rippling and pulsating and shimmering and gleaming and quivering. Here everything was flat, stolid, static. The strangeness of that seemed oppressive at first encounter; but now, as he ventured deeper and deeper into this unfamiliar world, Thimiroi came to see the underlying majesty of it. What he had mistaken for deadness was in fact strength. The people of this era were survivors: they had come through monstrous wars, tremendous technological change, immense social upheaval. Those who had outlasted the brutal tests of this taxing century were rugged, hearty, deeply optimistic. Their style of building and decoration showed that plainly. Nothing quivering and shimmery for them—oh, no! Great solid slabs of buildings, constructed out of simple, hard, unadorned materials that looked you straight in the eye—that was the way of things, here in the late twentieth century, in this time of assurance and robust faith in even better things to come.

Of course, Thimiroi thought, there was savage irony in that, considering what actually *was* to come. For a moment he was swept by deep and shattering compassion that brought him almost to tears. But he forced himself to fight the emotion back. Would Denvin weep for these people? Would Omerie, would Cenbe, would Kadro? The past is a sealed book, Thimiroi told himself forcefully. What has happened has happened. The losses are totaled, the debits are irretrievable. We have come here to experience the joys of jarring contrasts, as Denvin might say, not to cry over spilled milk.

He crossed the street. The next block was one of older-looking single-family houses, each set apart in a little garden plot where bright flowers bloomed and the leaves of the trees were just beginning to unfold under springtime's first warmth.

There was music coming from an upstairs window three houses from the corner. He paused to listen.

It was simple straightforward stuff, monochromatic in tone. The instrument, he supposed, was the piano, the one that made its sound by the action of little mallets striking strings stretched across a resonating

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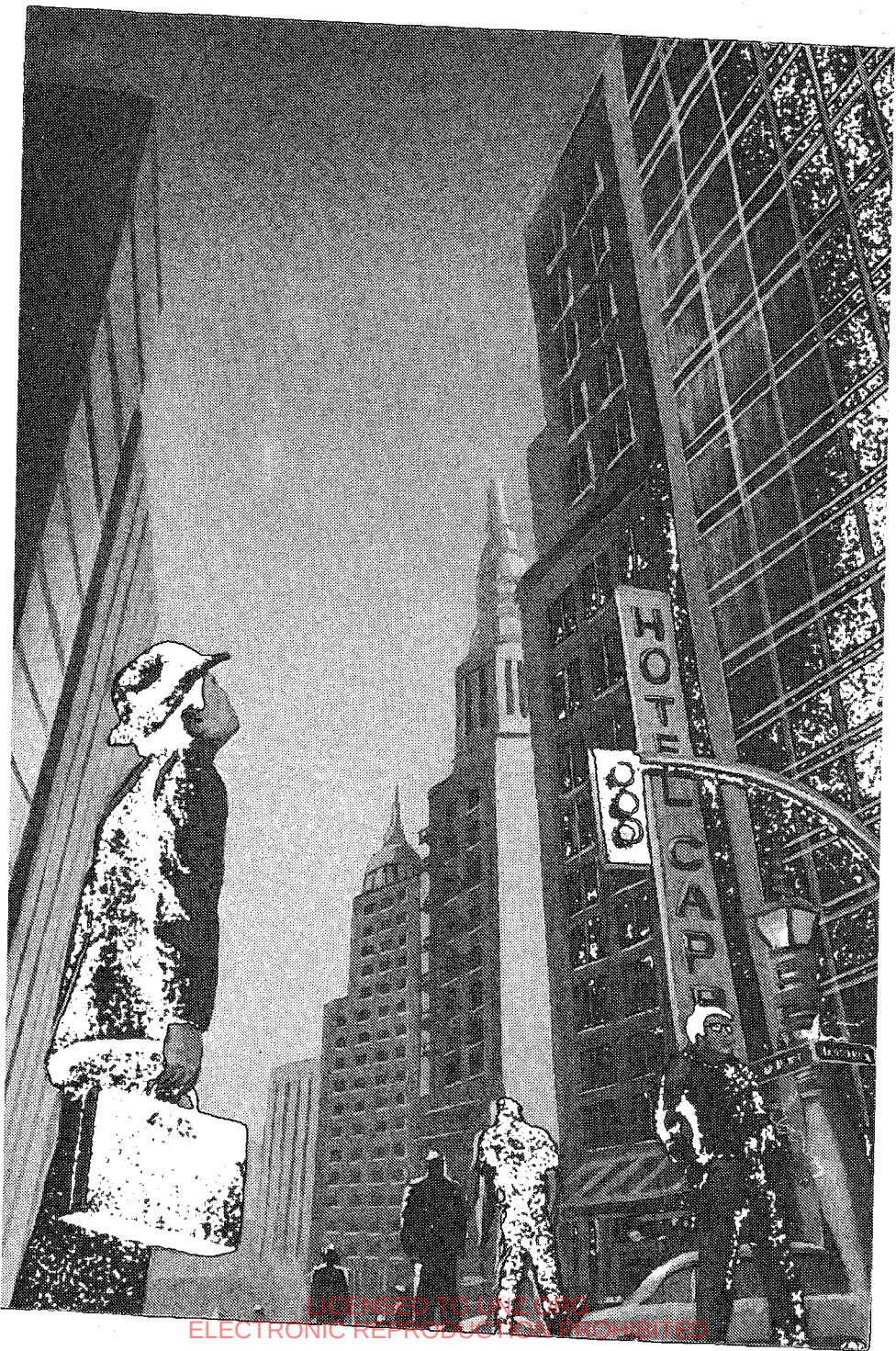

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board. The melodic line was both sinuous and stark, carried in the treble with a little commentary in the bass: music a child could play. Perhaps a child was indeed playing. The simplicity of it made him smile. It was quaint stuff, charming but naïve. He began to move onward.

And yet—yet—

Suddenly he felt himself caught and transfixed by a simple, magical turn of phrase that came creeping almost surreptitiously out of the bass line. It held him. Unexpectedly, it touched him. He remained still, unable to go on, listening while the lovely phrase fled, waiting in hope for its return. Yes, there it was again! And as it came and went, it cast startling illumination over the entire musical pattern. He saw its beauty and its artfully hidden depth now, and he grew angry at himself for having responded at first in that patronizing way, that snide, condescending Denvin-like way. Quaint? Naïve? Hardly. Simple, yes: this music achieved its effects with a minimum of means. But what was naïve about that? Was a quartet for strings naïve, because it did not make use of the resources of a full symphony orchestra? There was something about this music—its directness, its freedom—that the composers of his own time might well want to study, might even look upon with a certain degree of envy. For all their colossal technical resources, could the best of them—yes, even Cenbe—manage to equal the quiet force, Thimiroi wondered, of that easy, graceful little tune?

He stood listening until the music rolled to a gentle climax and a pleasant resolution and came to a halt. Its sudden absence brought him up short. He looked up imploringly at the open window. Play it again, he begged silently. Play it again! But there was no more music.

Impulsively he burst into applause, thinking that that might encourage an encore.

A woman's face appeared at the window. Thimiroi was aware of pale skin, long straight golden hair, warm blue-green eyes. "Very lovely," he called. "Thank you. Thank you very much."

She looked at him in apparent surprise, perhaps frowning a little. Then the frown was replaced for a moment by a quick amiable smile of pleasure; and then, just as quickly, she was gone. Thimiroi remained before her house a while longer, still hoping the music would begin again. But there was no more of it.

He returned to the hotel an hour later, dazzled, awed, weary, his mind full of wonders great and small. Just as he entered his suite, a small machine on the table beside the bed set up a curious insistent tinkling sound: the telephone, it was, so his technology implant informed him. He picked up the receiver.

"This is Thimiroi."

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"Back at last." The voice was Laliene's. "Was it an interesting walk?"

"One revelation after another. Certainly this year is going to be the high point of our trip."

Laliene laughed lazily. "Oh, darling Thimiroi, didn't you say the same thing when we came to Canterbury? And when we had the audience with the emperor on Capri?"

He did not reply.

"Anyway," she continued. "We're all going to gather in my suite before we go to the concert. Would you like to come? I've brewed a little tea, of course."

"Of course," he said. "I'll be right there."

She, too, had redone her rooms in the style of their own period. Instead of the ponderous hotel bed she had installed a floater, and in the sitting room now was a set of elegant turquoise slopes mounted around a depth baffle, so that one had the illusion of looking down into a long curving valley of ravishing beauty. Her choice of simso screens was, as usual, superb: wondrous dizzying vistas opened to infinity on every wall. Laliene herself looked sumptuous in a brilliant robe of woven silver mesh and a pair of scarlet gliders.

What surprised him was that no one else was there.

"Oh," she said lightly, "they'll all be coming along soon. We can get a head start."

She selected one of the lovely little cups on the table beside her, and offered it to him. And as he took it from her he felt a sudden transformation of the space between them, an intensification, an amplification. Without warning, Laliene was turning up the psychic voltage.

Her face was flushed, her eyes were glistening. The rich gray of them had deepened almost to purple. There was no mistaking the look. He had seen it many times before: Laliene in her best flirtatious mode, verging on the frankly seductive. Here they were, a man, a woman, well known to one another, together in a hotel room in a strange and distant city, about to enjoy a friendly sip or two of euphoriac tea—well, of course, Laliene could be expected to put on her most inviting manner, if only for the sport of it. But something else was going on here besides mere playful flirtation, Thimiroi realized. There was an odd eagerness to the set of her jaw, a peculiar quirk in the corners of her mouth. As though she *cared,* he thought. As though she were *serious.*

What was this? Was she trying to change the rules of the game?

Deftly she turned a music sphere on without looking away from him. Some barely audible melodikia came stealing like faint azure vapor into the air, and very gradually began to rise and throb. One of Cenbe's songs, he wondered? No. No, too voluptuous for Cenbe: more like Palivandrin's work, or Athaea's. He sipped his euphoriac. The sweet coiling fumes crept

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sinuously about him. Laliene stood close beside him, making it seem almost as if the music were coming from her and not the sphere. Thimiroi met her languid invitation with a practiced courteous smile, one which acknowledged her beauty, her grace, the intimacy of the moment, the prospect of delights to come, while neither accepting nor rejecting anything that was being proposed.

Of course they could do nothing now. At any moment the others would come trooping in.

But he wondered where this unexpected offer was meant to lead. He could, of course, put down the cup, draw her close: a kiss, a quick caress, an understanding swiftly arrived at, yes. But that did not seem to be quite what she was after, or at least that was not all she was after. And was the offer, he asked himself, all that unexpected? Thimiroi realized abruptly that there was no reason why he should be as surprised by this as he was. As he cast his mind back over the earlier weeks of their journey across time, he came to see that in fact Laliene had been moving steadily toward him since the beginning—in Canterbury, in Capri, a touch of the hand here, a quick private smile there, a quip, a glance. Her defending him so earnestly against Denvin's snobbery and Denvin's sarcasm, just after they had arrived here: what was that, if not the groundwork for some subtle treaty that was to be established subsequently between them? But why? Why? Such romance as could ever have existed for Laliene and him had come and gone long, long ago. Now they were merely friends. Perhaps he was mistaking the nature of this transaction. But no . . . no. There was no mistake.

Sparring for time, he said, keeping his tone and style carefully neutral, "You should come walking with me tomorrow. I saw marvelous things just a few blocks from here."

"I'd love to, Thimiroi. I want you to show me everything you've discovered."

"Yes. Yes, of course, Laliene."

But as he said it, he felt a deep stab of confusion. Everything? There was the house where that music had been playing. The open window, the simple, haunting melody. And the woman's face, then: the golden hair, the pale skin, the blue-green eyes. Thinking of her, thinking of the music she had played, Thimiroi found himself stirred by powerful and inexplicable forces that made him want to seize Laliene's music sphere and hurl it, and with it the subtle melodikia that it was playing, into the street. How smug that music sounded to him now, how overcivilized, how empty! And Laliene herself, so perfect in her beauty, the crimson hair, the flawless features, the sleek slender body—she was like some finely crafted statue, some life-sized doll: there was no reality to her, no essence of humanity. That woman in the window had shown more vital

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force in just her quick little half-frown and half-smile than Laliene displayed in all her repertoire of artful movements and expressions.

He stared at her, astounded, shaken.

She seemed shaken too. "Are you all right, Thimiroi?" she whispered.

"A little—tired, perhaps," he said huskily. "Stretched myself farther today than I really knew."

Laliene nodded toward the cup. "The tea will heal you."

"Yes. Yes."

He sipped. There was a knocking at the door. Laliene smiled, excused herself, opened it.

Denvin was there, and others behind him.

"Lutheena—Hollia—Hara—come in, come in, come in all of you! Omerie, how good to see you—Kleph, Klia—dear Klia—come in, everyone! How wonderful, how wonderful! I have the tea all ready and waiting for you!"

The concert that night was an extraordinary experience. Every moment, every note, seemed freighted with unforgettable meaning. Perhaps it was the poignancy of knowing that the beautiful young violinist who played so brilliantly had only a few weeks left to live, and that this grand and sumptuous concert hall itself was soon to be a smoking ruin. Perhaps it was the tiny magical phrase he had heard while listening in the street, which had somehow sensitized him to the fine secret graces of this seemingly simple twentieth-century music. Perhaps it was only the euphoriac they had had in Laliene's room before setting out. Whatever it was, it evoked a mood of unusual, even unique, attentiveness in Thimiroi, and as the minutes went by he knew that this evening at the concert hall would surely resonate joyously in his soul forever after.

That mood was jarred and shaken and irrevocably shattered at intermission, when he was compelled to stand with his stunningly dressed companions in the vestibule and listen to their brittle chirping chatter. How empty they all seemed, how foolish! Omerie stalking around in his most virile and commanding mode, like some sort of peacock, and imperious Lutheena matching him swagger for swagger, and Klia looking on complacently, and Kleph even more complacent, mysteriously lost in mists like some child who has found a packet of narcotic candies. And then of course there was the awesome Miss Hollia, who seemed older than the Pyramids, glowering at Omerie in unconcealed malevolence even while she complimented him on his mastery of twentieth-century costuming, and Hollia's pretty little playmate Hara as usual saying scarcely anything, but lending his support to his owner by glaring at Omerie also—and Denvin, chiming in with his sardonic, too-too-special insights from time to time—

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What a wearying crew, Thimiroi thought. These precious connoisseurs of history, these tireless voyagers of the eons. His head began to ache. He stepped away from them and began to walk back toward the auditorium. For the first time he noticed how the other members of the audience were staring at the little group. Wondering what country they came from, no doubt, and how rich they might be. Such perfection of dress, such precision of movement, such elegance of speech—foreign, obviously foreign, but mystifyingly so, for they seemed to belong to no recognizable nationality, and spoke with no recognizable accent. Thimiroi smiled wearily. "Do you want to know the truth about us?" he imagined himself crying. "We are visitors, yes. Tourists from a far country. But where we live is not only beyond your reach, it is beyond even your imaginations. What would you say, if I revealed to you that we are natives of the year—"

"Bored with the concert?" Laliene asked. She had come up quietly beside him, without his noticing it.

"Quite the contrary."

"Bored with us, then." It was not a question.

Thimiroi shrugged. "The intermission's an unfortunate interruption. I wish the music hadn't stopped."

"The music always stops," she said, and laughed her throatiest, smokiest laugh.

He studied her. She was still offering herself to him, with her eyes, her smile, her slightly sidewise stance. Thimiroi felt almost guilty for his willful failure to accept the gambit. Was he infuriating her? Was he wounding her?

But I do not want her, he told himself.

Once again, as in her room that afternoon while they were sipping euphoriac together, he was struck by the puzzling distaste and even anger that the perfection of her beauty aroused in him. Why this violent reaction? He had always lived in a world of perfect people. He had been accustomed all his life to Laliene's sort of flawlessness. There was no need for anyone to have blemishes of face or form any more. One took that sort of thing for granted; everyone did. Why should it trouble him now? What strange restlessness was this century kindling in his soul?

Thimiroi saw the strain, the tension, the barely suppressed impatience in Laliene's expression, and for a moment he was so abashed by the distress he knew he must be causing her that he came close to inviting her to join him in his suite after the concert. But he could not bring himself to do it. The moment passed; the tension slackened; Laliene made an elegant recovery, smiling and slipping her arm through his to lead him back to their seats, and he moved gratefully into a round of banter with her, and with Kleph, who drifted back up the aisle with them. But

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the magic and wonder of the concert were forever lost. In the second half he sat in a leaden slump, barely listening, unable to find the patterns that made the music comprehensible.

That night Thimiroi slept alone, and slept badly. After some hours of wakefulness he had to have recourse to one of his drugs. And even that brought him only partial solace, for with sleep came dark dreams of a singularly ominous and disruptive kind, full of hot furious blasts of anguish and panic, and he felt too drained of energy to get up again and rummage through his kit for the drug that banishes dreams. Morning was a long time in coming.

Over the next few days Thimiroi kept mostly to himself. He suspected that his fellow voyagers were talking about him—that they were worried about him—but he shied away from any sort of contact with them. The mere sight of them was something that caused him a perceptible pain, almost like the closing of a clamp about his heart. He longed to recapture that delicious openness to experience, that wonderful vulnerability, that he had felt when he had first arrived here, and he knew that so long as he was with any of them he would never be able to attain it.

By withdrawing from them in this morose way, he realized, he was missing some of the pleasures of the visit. The others were quite serious, as serious as such frivolous people ever could be, about the late twentieth century, and they spent each day moving busily about the city, taking advantage of its wealth of cultural opportunities—many of them obscure even to the natives of the era themselves. Kleph, whose specialty was Golconda studies, put together a small festival of the films of that great actor, and for two days they all, even Hollia, scurried around town seeing him at work in actual original prints. Omerie discovered, and proudly displayed, a first edition of Martin Drexel's *Lyrical Journeys*. "It cost me next to nothing," Omerie declared in vast satisfaction. "These people don't have the slightest idea of what Drexel achieved." A day or two later, Klia organized a river trip to the birthplace of David Courtney, a short way north of the city. Courtney would not be born, of course, for another seventy years, but his birthplace already existed, and who could resist making the pilgrimage? Thimiroi resisted. "Come with us," Laliene pleaded, with a curious urgency in her voice that he had never heard in it before. "This is one trip you really must not miss." He told her, calmly at first and then more forcefully, as she continued to press the point, that he had no desire to go. She looked at him in a stricken way, as though he had slapped her; but at that point she yielded. The others went on the river journey and he stayed behind, drifting through the streets of the downtown section without purpose, without goal.

Troubled as he was, he found excitement nevertheless in the things

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he saw on his solitary walks. The vigor and intensity of this era struck resonances in his own unfashionably robust spirit. The noise here, the smells, the colors, the expansive, confident air of the people, who obviously knew that they were living at one of history's great peak periods—everything startled and stimulated him in a way that Roman Capri and Chaucerian Canterbury had not been able to do.

Those older places and times had been too remote in spirit and essence from his native epoch to be truly comprehensible: they were interesting the way a visit to an alien planet can be interesting, but they had not moved him as this era moved him. Possibly the knowledge of impending doom that he had here had something to do with that. But there was something else. Thimiroi sensed, as he had not in any way sensed during the earlier stops, that he might actually be able to *live* in this era, and feel at home in it, and be happy here. For much of his life he had felt somehow out of place in his own world, unable all too often to come to terms with the seamlessness of everything, the impeccability of that immaculate era. Now he thought he understood why. As he wandered the streets of this booming, brawling, far-from-perfect city—taking joy in its curious mixture of earthy marvelous accomplishment and mysterious indifference to its own shortcomings, and finding himself curiously at ease in it—he began to perceive himself as a man of the late twentieth century who by some bewildering prank of the gods had been born long after his own proper time. And with that perception came a kind of calmness in the face of the storm that was to come.

Toward the end of the first week—it was the day when the others made their pilgrimage up the river to David Courtney's birthplace—Thimiroi encountered the golden-haired woman who had been playing the piano in the house down the block from the hotel. He caught sight of her downtown while he was crossing a plaza paved with pink cobblestones, which linked twin black towers of almost unthinkable height and mass near the river embankment.

Though he had only seen her for a moment, that one other time, and that time only her face and throat at the window, he had no doubt that it was she. Her blue-green eyes and long straight shining hair were unmistakable. She was fairly tall and very slender, with a tall woman's quick way of walking, ankles close together, shoulders slightly hunched forward. Thimiroi supposed that she was about thirty, or perhaps forty at most. She was young, at any rate, but not *very* young. He had no clear idea of how quickly people aged in this era. The first mild signs of aging seemed visible on her. In his own time that would mean nothing—there, a woman who looked like this might be anywhere between fifty and a hundred and fifty—but he knew that here they had no significant way

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of reversing the effects of time, and what she showed was almost certainly an indication that she had left her girlhood behind by some years but had not yet gone very far into the middle of the journey.

"Pardon me," he said, a little to his own surprise, as she came toward him.

She peered blankly at him. "Yes?"

Thimiroi offered her a disarming smile. "I'm a visitor here. Staying at the Montgomery House."

The mention of the famous hotel—and, perhaps, his gentle manner and the quality of his clothing—seemed to ease whatever apprehensions she might be feeling. She paused, looking at him questioningly.

He said, "You live near there, don't you? A few days ago, when I was out for a walk—it was my first day here—I heard you playing the piano. I'm sure it was you. I applauded when you stopped, and you looked out the window at me. I think you must have seen me. You frowned, and then you smiled."

She frowned now, just a quick flicker of confusion; and then again she smiled.

"Just like that, yes," Thimiroi said. "Do you mind if we talk? Are you in a hurry?"

"Not really," she said, and he sensed something troubled behind the words.

"Is there some place near here where we could have a drink? Or lunch, perhaps?" That was what they called the meal they ate at this time of day, he was certain. Lunch. People of this era met often for lunch, as a social thing. He did not think it was too late in the day to be offering her lunch. And he was reasonably sure he knew how to go about paying for it. Kadro had given him a little plastic card that they used for money here, and told him how to present it when purchasing things.

"Well, there's the River Cafe," she said. "That's just two or three blocks. I suppose we—" She broke off. "You know, I never ever do anything like this. Let myself get picked up in the street, I mean."

"Picked up? I do not understand."

"What don't you understand?"

"The phrase," Thimiroi said. "Pick up? To lift? Am I lifting you?"

She laughed and said, "Are you foreign?"

"Oh, yes. Very foreign."

"I thought your way of speaking was a little strange. So precise—every syllable perfectly shaped. No one really speaks English that way. Except computers, of course. You aren't a computer, are you?"

"Hardly."

"Good. I would never allow myself to be picked up by a computer in

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First National Plaza. Or anyplace else, as a matter of fact. Are you still interested in going to the River Cafe?"

"Of course."

She was playful now. "We can't do this anonymously, though. It's too sordid. My name's Christine Rawlins."

"And I am called Thimiroi."

"Timmery?"

"Thimiroi," he said.

"Thim-i-roi," she repeated, imitating his precision. "A very unusual name, I'd say. I've never met anyone named Thimiroi before. What country are you from, may I ask?"

"You would not know it. A very small one, very far away."

"Iran?"

"Farther away than that."

"A lot of people who came here from Iran prefer not to admit that that's where they're from."

"I am not from Iran, I assure you."

"But you won't tell me where?"

"You would not know it," he said again.

Her eyes twinkled. "Oh, you *are* from Iran! You're a spy, aren't you? I see the whole thing: they're getting ready to have a new revolution, there's another Ayatollah on his way from his hiding place in Beirut, and you're here to transfer Iranian assets out of this country before—" She broke off, looking sheepish. "I'm sorry. I'm just being weird. Have I offended you?"

"Not at all."

"You don't have to tell me where you're from if you don't want to."

"I am from Stiinowain," he said, astounded at his own daring in actually uttering the forbidden name.

She tried to repeat the name, but was unable to manage the soft glide of the first syllable.

"You're right," she said. "I don't know anything about it at all. But you'll tell me all about it, won't you?"

"Perhaps," he said.

The River Cafe was a glossy bubble of pink marble and black glass cantilevered out over the embankment, with a semicircular open-air dining area, paved with shining flagstones, that jutted even farther, so that it seemed suspended almost in mid-river. They were lucky enough to find one vacant table that was right at the cafe's outermost edge, looking down on the swift blue river-flow. "Ordinarily the outdoor section doesn't open until the middle of June," Christine told him. "But this year it's been so warm and dry that they opened it a month early. We've been

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breaking records every day. There's never been a May like this, that's what they're all saying. Just one long run of fabulous weather day after day after day."

"It's been extraordinary, yes."

"What is May like in Stiin—in your country?" she asked.

"Very much like this. As a matter of fact, it is rather like this all the year round."

"Really? How wonderful that must be!"

It must have seemed like boasting to her. He regretted that. "No," he said. "We take our mild climate for granted and the succession of beautiful days means nothing to us. It is better this way, sudden glory rising out of contrast, the darkness of winter giving way to the splendor of spring. The warm sunny days coming upon you like—like the coming of grace, shall I say?—like—" He smiled. "Like that heavenly little theme that came suddenly out of the music you were playing, transforming something simple and ordinary into something unforgettable. Do you know what I mean?"

"Yes," she said. "I think I do."

He began to hum the melody. Her eyes sparkled, and she nodded and grinned warmly, and after a moment or two she started humming along with him. He felt a tightness at his throat, warmth along his back and shoulders, a throbbing in his chest. All the symptoms of a rush of strong emotion. Very strange to him, very primitive, very exciting, very pleasing.

People at other tables turned. They seemed to notice something also. Thimiroi saw them smiling at the two of them with that unmistakable proprietorial smile that strangers will offer to young lovers in the springtime. Christine must have seen those smiles too, for color came to her face, and for a moment she looked away from him as though embarrassed.

"Tell me about yourself," he said.

"We should order first. Are you familiar with our foods? A salad might be nice on a beautiful warm day like this—and then perhaps the cold salmon plate, or—" She stopped abruptly. "Is something wrong?"

Thimiroi struggled to fight back nausea. "Not a salad, no, please. It is—not good for me. And in my country we do not eat fish of any sort, not ever."

"Forgive me."

"But how could you have known?"

"Even so—you looked so distressed—"

"Not really. It was only a moment's uneasiness." He scanned the menu desperately. Nothing on it made sense to him. At home, he would only have to touch the screen beside anything that seemed to be of interest, and he would get a quick flavor-analog appercept to guide his choice. But

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that was at home. Here he had been taking most of his meals in his room, meals prepared many centuries away by his own autochef and sent to him down the time conduit. On those few occasions when he ate in the hotel dining room with his fellow travelers, he relied on Kadro to choose his food for him. Now, plunging ahead blindly, he selected something called carpaccio for his starter, and vichyssoise to follow.

"Are you sure you don't want anything warm?" Christine asked gently.

"Oh, I think not, not on such a mild day," Thimiroi said casually. He had no idea what he had ordered; but he was determined not to seem utterly ignorant of her era.

The carpaccio, though, turned out to be not merely cold but raw: red raw meat, very thinly sliced, in a light sauce. He stared at it in amazement. His whole body recoiled at the thought of eating raw meat. His bones themselves protested. He saw Christine staring at him, and wondered how much of his horror his expression was revealing to her. But there was no helping it: he slipped his fork under one of the paper-thin slices and conveyed it to his mouth. To his amazement it was delicious. Forgetting all breeding, he ate the rest without pausing once, while she watched in what seemed like a mixture of surprise and amusement.

"You liked that, didn't you?" she said.

"Carpaccio has always been one of my favorites," he told her shamelessly.

Vichyssoise turned out to be a cold dish too, a thick white soup, presumably made from some vegetable. It seemed harmless and proved to be quite tasty. Christine had ordered the salmon, and he tried not to peer at her plate, or to imagine what it must be like to put chunks of sea-creatures in one's mouth, while she ate.

"You promised to tell me something about yourself," he reminded her.

She looked uneasy. "It's not a very interesting story, I'm afraid."

"But you must tell me a little of it. Are you a musician by profession? Surely you are. Do you perform in the concert hall?"

Her look of discomfort deepened. "I know you don't mean to be cruel, but—"

"Cruel? Of course not. But when I was listening there outside the window I could feel the great gift that you have."

"Please."

"I don't understand."

"No, you don't, do you?" she said gently. "You weren't trying to be funny, or to hurt me. But I'm not any sort of gifted pianist, Thimiroi. Believe me. I'm just a reasonably good amateur. Maybe when I was ten years old I dreamed of having a concert career some day, but I came to my senses a long time ago."

"You are too modest."

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"No. No. I know what I am. And what the real thing is like. Even *they* don't have an easy time of it. You can't believe how many concert-quality pianists my age there are in this country. With so many genuine geniuses out there, there's no hope at all for a decent third-rater like me."

He shook his head in amazement, remembering the magical sounds that had come from her window. "Third-rater!"

"I don't have any illusions about that," she said. "I'm the sort of pianist who winds up giving piano lessons, not playing in Carnegie Hall. I have a couple of pupils. They come and go. It's not possible to earn a living that way. And the job that I did have, with an export-import firm—well, they say that this is the most prosperous time this country has seen in the past forty years, but somehow I managed to get laid off last week anyway. That's why I'm downtown today—another job interview. You see? Just an ordinary woman, an ordinary life, ordinary problems—"

"There is nothing ordinary about you," said Thimiroi fervently. "Not to me! To me you are altogether extraordinary, Christine!" She seemed almost about to weep as he said that. Compassion and tenderness overwhelmed him, and he reached out to take her hand in his, to comfort her, to reassure her. Her eyes widened and she pulled back instantly, catching her breath sharply, as though he had tried to stab her with his fork.

Thimiroi looked at her sadly. The quickness and vehemence of her reaction mystified him.

"That was wrong?" he said. "To want to touch your hand?"

Awkwardly Christine said, "You surprised me, that's all. I'm sorry. I didn't mean—it was rude of me, actually—oh, Thimiroi, I can't explain—it was just automatic, a kind of dumb reflex—"

Puzzled, he turned his hand over several times, examining it, searching for something about it that might have frightened or repelled her. He saw nothing. It was simply a hand. After a moment she took it lightly with her own, and held it.

He said, "You have a husband? Is that why I should not have done that?"

"I'm not married, no." She glanced away from him, but did not release his hand. "I'm not even—involved. Not currently." Her fingers were lightly stroking his wrist. "I have to confess something," she said, after a moment. "I saw you at Symphony Hall last week. The De Santis concert."

"You did?"

"In the lobby. With your—friends. I watched you all, wondering who you were. There was a kind of glow about the whole group of you. The women were all so beautiful, every one of them. Immaculate. Perfect. Like movie stars, they were."

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"They are nothing compared with you."

"Please. Don't say any more things like that. I don't like to be flattered, Thimiroi. Not only does it make me uncomfortable but it simply isn't effective with me. Whatever else I am, I'm a realistic woman. Especially about myself."

"And I am a truthful man. What I tell you is what I feel, Christine." Her hand tightened on his wrist at that. He said, "So you knew who I was, when I approached you in the plaza up above just now."

"Yes," she murmured.

"But pretended you did not."

"I was frightened."

"I am not frightening, Christine."

"Not frightened of you. Of me. When I saw you that first day, standing outside my house—I felt—I don't know, I felt something strange, just looking at you. Felt that I had seen you before somewhere, that I had known you very well in some other life, perhaps, that—oh, Thimiroi, I'm not making any sense, am I? But I knew you had been *important* to me at some other time. Or *would* be important. It's crazy, isn't it? And I don't have any room in my life for craziness. I'm just trying to hold my own, don't you see? Trying to maintain, trying to hang on and not get swept under. In these wonderful prosperous times, I'm all alone, Thimiroi, I'm not sure where I'm heading, what's going to come next for me. Everything seems so uncertain. And so I don't want any extra uncertainties in my life."

"I will not bring you uncertainty," he said.

She stared and said nothing. Her hand still touched his.

"If you are finished with your food," he said, "perhaps you would like to come back to the hotel with me."

There was a long tense silence. After a time she drew her hand away from him and knotted her fingers together, and sat very still, her expression indecipherable.

"You think it was inappropriate of me to have extended such an invitation," he said finally.

"No. Not really."

"I want only to be your friend."

"Yes. I know that."

"And I thought, since you live so close to the hotel, I could offer you some refreshment, and show you some treasures of my own country that I have brought with me. I meant nothing more than that, Christine. Please. Believe me."

She seemed to shed some of her tension. "I'd love to stop off at your hotel with you for a little while," she said.

* * *

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He had no doubt at all that it was much too soon for them to become lovers. Not only was he completely unskilled in this era's sociosexual rituals and procedures, so that it was probably almost impossible for him to avoid offending or displeasing her by this or that unintentional violation of the accepted courtship customs of her society, but also at this point he was still much too uncertain of the accuracy of his insight into her own nature. Once he knew her better, perhaps he would be less likely to go about things incorrectly, particularly since she already gave him the benefit of many doubts because she knew he came from some distant land.

There was also the not inconsiderable point to consider that it was a profound violation of the rules of The Travel to enter into any kind of emotional or physical involvement with a native of a past era.

That, somehow, seemed secondary to Thimiroi just now. He knew all about the importance of avoiding distortion or contamination of the timeline; they drilled it into you endlessly before you ever started to Travel. But suddenly such issues seemed unreal and abstract to him. What mattered was what he felt: the surge of delight, eagerness, passion, that ran through him when he turned to look at this woman of a far-off time. All his life he had been a stranger among his own people, a prisoner within his own skin; now, here, at last, it seemed to him that he had a chance of breaking through the net of brittle conventions that for so long had bound his spirit, and touching, at last, the soul of another human being. He had read about love, of course—who had not?—but here, he thought, he might actually experience it. Was that a reckless ambition? Well, then, he would be reckless. The alternative was to condemn himself to a lifetime of bitter regret.

Therefore he schooled himself to patience. He dared not be too hasty, for fear of ruining everything.

Christine appeared astounded by what she saw in his rooms. She wandered through them like a child in a wonderland, hardly breathing, pausing here and there to look, to reach out hesitantly, to hold her hand above this or that miraculous object as though afraid actually to touch it but eager to experience its texture.

"You brought all this from your own country?" she asked. "You must have had fifty suitcases!"

"We get homesick very easily. We wish to have our familiar things about us."

"The way a sultan would travel. A pasha." Her eyes were shining with awe. "These little tables—I've never seen anything like them. I try to follow the weave, but the pattern won't stand still. It keeps sliding around its own corners."

"The woodworkers of Sipulva are extremely ingenious," Thimiroi said.

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"Sipulva? Is that a city in your country?"

"A place nearby," he said. "You may touch them if you wish."

She caressed the intricately carved surfaces, fingers tracing the weave as it went through its incomprehensible convolutions. Thimiroi, smiling, turned the music sphere on—one of Mirtin's melodikias began to come from it, a shimmering crystalline piece—and set about brewing some tea. Christine drifted onward, examining the draperies, the glistening carpets, the pulsating esthetikon that was sending waves of color through the room, the simso screens with their shifting views of unknown worlds. She was altogether enthralled. It would certainly be easy enough to seduce her now, Thimiroi realized. A little sensuous music, a few sips of euphoriac, perhaps some surreptitious adjustments of the little subsonic so that it sent forth heightened tonalities of *anticipation* and *excitation*—yes, that was all that it would take, he knew. But easy conquest was not what he wanted. He did not intend to pass through her soul like a frivolous tourist drifting through a museum in search of an hour's superficial diversion.

One cup of tea for each of them, then, and no more. Some music, some quick demonstrations of a few of the little wonders that filled his rooms. A light kiss, finally, and then one that was more intense: but a quick restoration, afterward, of the barriers between them. Christine seemed no more willing to breach those barriers today than he was. Thimiroi was relieved at that, and pleased. They seemed to understand each other already.

"I'll walk you home," he said, when they plainly had reached the time when she must either leave or stay much longer.

"You needn't. It's just down the street." Her hand lingered in his. Her touch was warm, her skin faintly moist, pleasantly so. "You'll call me? Here's my number." She gave him a smooth little yellow card. "We could have dinner, perhaps. Or a concert—whatever you'd like to see—"

"Yes, Yes, I'll call you."

"You'll be here at least a few more days, won't you?"

"Until the end of the month."

She nodded. He saw the momentary darkening of her expression, and guessed at the inward calculations: reckoning the number of days remaining to his visit, the possibilities that those days might hold, the rashness of embarking on anything that would surely not extend beyond the last day of May. Thimiroi had already made the same calculations himself, though tempered by information that she could not conceivably have, information which made everything inconceivably more precarious. After the smallest of pauses she said, "That's plenty of time, isn't it? But call me soon, Thimiroi. Will you? Will you?"

* * *

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A little while later there was a light knocking at the door, and Thimiroi, hoping with a startling rush of eagerness that Christine had found some pretext for returning, opened it to find Laliene. She looked weary. The perfection of her beauty was unmarred, of course, every shining strand of hair in its place, her tanned skin fresh and glistening. But beneath the radiant outer glow there was once again something drawn and tense and ragged about her, a subliminal atmosphere of strain, of fatigue, of devitalization, that was not at all typical of the Laliene he had known. This visit to the late twentieth century did not seem to be agreeing with her.

"May I come in?" she asked. He nodded and beckoned to her. "We've all just returned from the Courtney birthplace," she said. "You really should have gone with us, Thimiroi. You can feel the aura of the man everywhere in the place, even this early, so many years before he even existed." Taking a few steps into the room, Laliene paused, sniffed the air lightly, smiled. "Having a little tea by yourself just now, were you, Thimiroi?"

"Just a cup. It was a long quiet afternoon."

"Poor Thimiroi. Couldn't find anything at all interesting to do? Then you certainly should have come with us." He saw her glance flicking quickly about, and felt pleased and relieved that he had taken the trouble to put the teacups away. It was in fact no business of Laliene's that he had had a guest in here this afternoon, but he did not want her, all the same, to know that he had.

"Can I brew a cup for you?" he asked.

"I think not. I'm so tired after our outing—it'll put me right to sleep, I would say." She turned toward him, giving him a direct inquisitorial stare that he found acutely discomforting. In a straightforward way that verged on bluntness she said, "I'm worried about you, you know, Thimiroi. Keeping off by yourself so much. The others are talking. You really should make an effort to join the group more often."

"Maybe I'm bored with the group, Laliene. With Denvin's snide little remarks, with Hollia's queenly airs, with Hara's mincing inanity, with Omerie's arrogance, with Klia's vacuity—"

"And with my presumptuousness?"

"You said that. Not I."

But it was true, he realized. She was crowding him constantly, forever edging into his psychic space, pressing herself upon him in a strange, almost incomprehensible way. It had been that way since the beginning of the trip: she never seemed to leave him alone. Her approach toward him was an odd mix of seductiveness, protectiveness, and— what? —inquisitiveness? She was like that strangest of antique phenomena, a jealous lover, almost. But jealous of what? Of whom? Surely not Christine.

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Christine had not so much as existed for him, except as a mysterious briefly-glimpsed face in a window, until this afternoon, and Laliene had been behaving like this for many weeks. It made no sense. Even now, covertly snooping around his suite, all too obviously searching for some trace of the guest who had only a short while before been present here—what was she after?

He took two fresh cups from his cabinet. "If you don't mind, Laliene, I'll put up a little more tea for myself. And it would be no trouble to make some for you."

"I said I didn't want any, Thimiroi. I don't enjoy gulping the stuff down, you know, the way Kleph does."

"Kleph?"

"Certainly you know how heavily she indulges. She's euphoric more often than not these days."

Thimiroi shrugged. "I didn't realize that. I suppose Omerie can get on anyone's nerves. Even Kleph's."

Laliene studied him for a long moment. "You don't know about Kleph, then?" she asked finally. "No, I suppose you don't. Keeping to yourself this way, how would you?"

This was maddening. "What about Kleph?" he said, his voice growing tight.

"Perhaps you should fix some tea for me after all," Laliene said. "It's quite a nasty story. It'll be easier for me with a little euphoriac."

"Very well."

He busied himself over the tiny covered cups. In a short while the fragrant coiling steam began to rise through the fine crescent opening. His hands trembled, and he nearly swept the cups from the tray as he reached for them; but he recovered quickly and brought them to the table. They sipped the drug in silence. Watching her, Thimiroi was struck once more by the inhuman superfluity of Laliene's elegance. Laliene was much too perfect. How different from Christine, whose skin had minute unimportant blemishes here and there, whose teeth were charmingly irregular, whose hair looked like real hair and not like something spun by machines. Christine probably *perspired,* he thought. She endured the messiness of menstruation. She might even snore. She was wonderfully real, wonderfully human in every regard. Whereas Laliene—Laliene seemed—scarcely real at all—

"What's this about Kleph, now?" Thimiroi said, after a time.

"She's become involved with the man that the Sanciscos are renting their house from."

"Involved?"

"An affair," said Laliene acidly. Her glistening eyes were trained remorselessly on his. "He goes to her room. She gives him too much tea,

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and has too much herself. She plays music for him, or they watch the simsos. And then—then—"

"How do you know any of this?" Thimiroi asked.

Laliene took a deep draught of the intoxicating tea, and her brow grew less furrowed, her dark rich-hued eyes less troubled. "She told Klia. Klia told me."

"And Omerie? Does he know?"

"Of course. He's furious. Kleph can sleep with anyone she cares to, naturally—but such a violation of the Travel rules, to get involved with one of these ancient people! And so stupid, too—spending so much of the precious time of her visit here letting herself get wrapped up in a useless diversion with some commonplace and extremely uninteresting man. A man who isn't even alive, who's been dead for all these centuries!"

"He doesn't happen to be dead right now," Thimiroi said.

Laliene gave him a look of amazement. "Are you defending her, Thimiroi?"

"I'm trying to comprehend her."

"Yes. Yes, of course. But certainly Kleph must see that although he may be alive at the present moment, technically speaking, the present moment itself isn't really the present moment. Not if you see it from our point of view, and what other point of view is appropriate for us to take? What's past is past, sealed and finished. In absolute reality this person of Kleph's died long ago, at least so far as we're concerned." Laliene shook her head. "No, no, Thimiroi, completely apart from the issue of transgression against the rules of The Travel, it's an unthinkably foolish adventure that Kleph's let herself get into. Unthinkably foolish! It's purely a waste of time. What kind of pleasure can she possibly get from it? She might as well be coupling with—with a donkey!"

"Who is this man?" Thimiroi asked.

"What does that matter? His name is Oliver Wilson. He owns that house where they are, the one that Hollia is trying to buy, and he lives there, too. Omerie neglected to arrange for him to vacate the premises for the month. You may have seen him: a very ordinary-looking pleasant young man with light-colored hair. But he isn't important. What's important is the insane, absurd, destructive thing Kleph is doing. Which particular person of this long-gone era she happens to be doing it with is completely beside the point."

Thimiroi studied her for a time.

"Why are you telling me this, Laliene?"

"Aren't you interested in what your friends are getting themselves mixed up in?"

"Is Kleph my friend?"

"Isn't she?"

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"We have come to the same place at the same time, Kleph and I," Thimiroi said. "Does that make us friends? We *know* each other, Kleph and I. Possibly we were even lovers once, possibly not. My relationship with the Sanciscos in general and with Kleph in particular isn't a close one nowadays. So far as this matters to me, Kleph can do what she likes with anyone she pleases."

"She runs the risk of punishment."

"She was aware of that. Presumably she chooses not to be troubled by it."

"She should think of Omerie, then. And Klia. If Kleph is forbidden to Travel again, they will be deprived of her company. They have always Traveled together. They are accustomed to Traveling together. How selfish of her, Thimiroi."

"Presumably she chooses not to be troubled by that, either," said Thimiroi. "In any case, it's no concern of yours or mine." He hesitated. "Do you know what I think *should* trouble her, Laliene? The fact that she's going to pay a very steep emotional price for what she's doing, if indeed she's actually doing it. That part of it ought to be on her mind, at least a little."

"What do you mean?" Laliene asked.

"I mean the effect it will have on her when the meteor comes, and this man is killed by it. Or by what comes after the meteor, and you know what that is. If the meteor doesn't kill him, the Blue Death will take him a week or two later. How will Kleph feel then, Laliene? Knowing that the man she loves is dead? And that she has done nothing, nothing at all, to spare him from the fate that she knew was rushing toward him? Poor Kleph! Poor foolish Kleph! What torment it will be for her!"

"The man she *loves?"*

"Doesn't she?"

Laliene looked astounded. "What ever gave you that idea? It's a game, Thimiroi, only a silly game! She's simply playing with him. And then she'll move along. He won't be killed by the meteor—obviously. He'll be in the same house as all the rest of us when it strikes. And she'll be at Charlemagne's coronation by the time the Blue Death breaks out. She won't even remember his *name,* Thimiroi. How could you possibly have thought that she—she—" Laliene shook her head. "You don't understand a thing, do you?"

"Perhaps I don't." Thimiroi put his cup down and stared at his fingers. They were trembling. "Would you like some more tea, Laliene?"

"No, I—yes. Yes, another, if you will, Thimiroi."

He set about the task of brewing the euphoriac. His head was throbbing. Things were occuring to him that he had not bothered to consider before. While he worked, Laliene rose, roamed the room, toyed with this

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artifact and that, and drifted out into the hall that led to the bedroom. Did she suspect anything? Was she searching for something, perhaps? He wondered whether Christine had left any trace of her presence behind that Laliene might be able to detect, and decided that probably she had not. Certainly he hoped not. Considering how agitated Laliene seemed to be over Kleph's little fling with her landlord, how would she react if she knew that he, too, was involved with someone of this era?

Involved?

How involved are you, really? he asked himself.

He thought of all that they had said just now about Kleph and her odd little affair with Oliver Wilson. A cold, inescapable anguish began to rise in him. How sorry he had felt for Kleph, a moment ago! The punishment for transgression against the rules, yes—but also the high emotional price that he imagined Kleph would pay for entangling herself with someone who lay under sentence of immediate death—the guilt—the sense of irretrievable loss—

The meteor—the Blue Death—

"The tea is ready," Thimiroi announced, and as he reached for the delicate cups he knocked one into the other, and both of the pretty things went tumbling from the tray, landing at the carpet's edge and cracking like eggshells against the wooden floor. A little rivulet of euphoriac came swirling from them. He gasped, shocked and appalled. Laliene, emerging from one of the far rooms, looked down at the wreckage for a moment, then swiftly knelt and began to sweep the fragments together.

"Oh, Thimiroi," she said, glancing upward at him. "Oh, how sad, Thimiroi, how terribly sad—"

After lunch the next day, he telephoned Christine, certain that she would be out and a little uneasy about that; but she answered on the second ring, and there was an eagerness in her voice that made him think she had been poised beside the phone for some time now, waiting for him to call. Did she happen to be free this afternoon? Yes, yes, she said, she was free. Did she care to—his mind went blank a moment—to go for a walk with him somewhere? Yes, yes, what a lovely idea! She sounded almost jubilant. A perfect day for a walk, yes!

She was waiting outside her house when Thimiroi came down the street. It was a day much like all the other days so far, sharp cloudless sky, brilliant sun, gold blazing against blue. But there was a deeper tinge of warmth in the air, for May was near its end now and spring was relinquishing its hold to the coming summer. Trees which had seemed barely into leaf the week before now unfurled canopies of rich deep green.

"Where shall we go?" she asked him.

"This is your city. I don't know the good places."

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"We could walk in Baxter Park, I suppose."

Thimiroi frowned. "Isn't that all the way on the other side of the river?"

"Baxter Park? Oh, no, you must be thinking of Butterfield Gardens. Up on the high ridge, you mean, over there opposite us? The very big park, with the botanical gardens and the zoo and everything? Baxter Park's right near here, just a few blocks up the hill. We could be there in ten minutes."

Actually it was more like fifteen, and no easy walk, but none of that mattered to Thimiroi. Simply being close to Christine awoke unfamiliar sensations of contentment in him. They climbed the steep streets side by side, saying very little as they made the difficult ascent, pausing now and again to catch their breaths. The city was like a giant bowl, cleft by the great river that ran through its middle, and they were nearing its rim.

Baxter Park, like its counterpart across the river that Thimiroi had seen when he first arrived in the twentieth century, occupied a commanding position looking out and down toward the heart of the urban area. But apart from that the two parks were very different, for the other was intricately laid out, with roads and amusement sectors scattered through it, and this one seemed nothing more than a strip of rough, wild semi-forest that had been left undeveloped at the top of the city. Simple paths crudely paved led through its dense groves and tangles of underbrush.

"It isn't much, I know—" Christine said.

"It's beautiful here. So wild, so untamed. And so close to the city. We can look down and see houses and office buildings and bridges, and yet back here it's just as it must have been ten thousand years ago. There is nothing like this where I come from."

"Do you mean that?"

"We took our wilderness away a long time ago. We should have kept a little—just a little, a reminder, the way you have here. But it's too late now. It has been gone so long, so very long." Thimiroi peered into the hazy distance. Shimmering in the mid-afternoon heat, the city seemed a fairytale place, enchanted, wondrous. Shading his eyes, he peered out and downward, past the residential district to the metropolitan center by the river, and beyond it to the bridges, the suburbs on the far side, the zone of parks and recreational areas barely visible on the opposite slope. How beautiful it all was, how majestic, how grand! The thought that it all must perish in just a matter of days brought the taste of bile to his mouth, and he turned away, coughing, sputtering.

"Is something the matter?" Christine asked.

"Nothing—no—I'll be all right—"

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He wondered how far they were right now from the path along which the meteor would travel.

As he understood it, it was going to come in from this side of the city, traveling low across the great urban bowl like a stone that a boy has sent skimming across a stream and striking somewhere midway down the slope, between the zone of older houses just below the Montgomery House hotel and the business district farther on. At the point of impact, of course, everything would be annihilated for blocks around. But the real devastation would come a moment later, so Kadro had explained: when the shock wave struck and radiated outward, flattening whole neighborhoods in a steadily widening circle, as if they had been swatted by a giant's contemptuous hand.

And then the fires, springing up everywhere—

And then, a few days later, when the invading microbes had had a chance to spread through the contaminated water supply of the shattered city, the plague—

"You look so troubled, Thimiroi," Christine said, nestling up beside him, sliding her arm through his.

"Do I?"

"You must miss your homeland very much."

"No. No, that isn't it."

"Why so sad, then?"

"I find it extremely moving," he said, "to look out over your whole city this way. Taking it all in a single sweep. Seeing it in all its magnificence, all its power."

"But it's not even the most important city in the —"

"I know. But that doesn't matter. The fact that there may be bigger cities takes nothing away from the grandeur of this one. Especially for me. Where I come from, there are no cities of any size at all. Our population is extremely small . . . *extremely* small."

"But it must be a very wealthy country, all the same."

Thimiroi shrugged. "I suppose it is. But what does that mean? I look at your city here and I think of the transience of all that is splendid and grand. I think of all the great empires of the past, and how they rose, and fell, and were swept away and forgotten. All the empires that ever were, and all those that will ever be."

To his surprise, she laughed. "Oh, how strange you are!"

"Strange?"

"So terribly solemn. So philosophical. Brooding about the rise and fall of empires on a glorious spring day like this. Standing here with the most amazing sunlight pouring down on us and telling me in those elocution-school tones of yours that empires that don't even exist yet are already swept away and forgotten. How can something be forgotten that

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hasn't yet even happened? And how can you even bother to think about anything morbid in a season like this one?" She moved closer to him, nuzzling against his side almost like a cat. "Do you know what I think, standing here right this minute looking out at the city? I think that the warmth of the sun feels wonderful and that the air is as fresh as new young wine and that the city has never seemed more sparkling or prosperous and that this is the most beautiful spring day in at least half a million years. And the last thing that's going to cross my mind is that the weather may not hold or that the time of prosperity may not last or that great empires always crumble and are forgotten. But perhaps you and I are just different, Thimiroi. Some people are naturally gloomy, and always see the darkest side of everything, and then there are the people who couldn't manage to be moody and broody even if their lives depended on—" She broke off suddenly. "Oh, Thimiroi, I don't mean to offend you. You know that."

"You haven't offended me." He turned to her. "What's an elocution-school voice?"

"A trained one," she said, smiling. "Like the voice of a radio or TV announcer. You have a marvelous voice, you know. You speak right from the center of your diaphragm, and you always pause for breath in the right places, and the tone is so rich, so perfect—a singer's voice, really. You can sing very well, can't you? I know you can. Later, perhaps, I could play for you, and you could sing for me, back at my place, some song of Stiino—of your own country—"

"Yes," he said. "We could try that, yes."

He kissed her, then, and it was a different sort of kiss from either of the two kisses of the day before, very different indeed; and as he held her his hands ran across her back, and over the nape of her neck, and down the sides of her arms, and she pressed herself close against him. Then after a long moment they moved apart again, both of them flushed and excited, and smiled, and looked at each other as though they were seeing each other for the first time.

They walked hand in hand through the park, neither of them saying anything. Small animals were everywhere, birds and odd shiny bright-colored little insects and comical four-legged grayish beasts with big shaggy tails lalloping behind them. Thimiroi was amazed by the richness of all this wildlife, and the shrubs and wildflowers dazzling with early bloom, and the huge thick-boled trees that rose so awesomely above them. What an extraordinary place this century was, he told himself: what a fantastic mixture of the still unspoiled natural world and the world of technology and industry. They had these great cities, these colossal buildings, these immense bridges—and yet, also, they still had

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saved room for flowers, for beetles and birds, for little furry animals with enormous tails. When the thought of the meteor, and the destruction that it would cause, crept back into his mind, he forced it furiously away. He asked Christine to tell him the names of things: this is a squirrel, she said, and this is a maple tree, and this a grasshopper. She was surprised that he knew so little about them, and asked him what kinds of insects and trees and animals they had in his own country.

"Very few," he told her. "All our wild things went from us long ago."

"Not even squirrels left? Grasshoppers?"

"Nothing like that," he said. "Nothing at all. That is why we travel—to experience life in places such as this. To experience squirrels. To experience grasshoppers."

"Of course. Everyone travels to see things different from what they have at home. But it's hard to believe that there's any country that's done such ecological damage to itself that it doesn't even have—"

"Oh, the problem is not ecological damage," said Thimiroi. "Not as you understand the term. Our country is very beautiful, in its way, and we care for it extremely well. The problem is that it is an extremely civilized place. Too civilized, I think. We have everything under control. And one thing that we controlled, a very long time ago, is the very thing that this park is designed to provide: the world of nature, as it existed before the cities ever were."

She stared. "Not even a squirrel."

"Not even a squirrel, no."

"Where is this country of yours? Did you say it was in Arabia? One of the oil kingdoms?"

"No," he said. "Not in Arabia."

They went onward. The afternoon's heat was at its peak, now, and Thimiroi felt the moisture of the air clinging close against his skin, a strange and unusual sensation for him. Again they paused, after a while, to kiss, even more passionately than before.

"Come," Christine said. "Let's go home."

They hurried down the hillside, taking it practically at a jog. But they slowed as the Montgomery House came into view. Thimiroi thought of inviting her to his room once again, but the thought of Laliene hovering nearby—spying on him, scowling her disapproval as he entered into the same transgression for which she had so sternly censured Kleph —displeased him. Christine reminded him, though, that she had offered to play the piano for him, and wanted him to sing for her. Gladly, eagerly, Thimiroi accepted the invitation to go with her to her house.

But as they approached it he was dismayed to see Kleph standing on the steps of a big, rambling old house just opposite Christine's, on the uphill side of the street. She was talking to a sturdy square-shouldered

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man with a good-natured, open face, and she did not appear to notice Thimiroi.

Christine said, "Do you want to say hello to her?"

"Not really."

"She's one of your friends, isn't she? Someone from your country?"

"She's from my country, yes. But not exactly a friend. Just someone who's taking the same tour I am. Is that the house where she's staying?"

"Yes," Christine said. "She and another woman, and a tall somber-looking man. I saw them all with you, that night at the concert hall. They've rented the house for the whole month. That man's the owner, Oliver Wilson."

"Ah." Thimiroi drew his breath in sharply.

So that was the one. Oliver. Kleph's twentieth-century lover. Thimiroi felt a stab of despair. Looking across the way now at Kleph, deep in conversation with this Oliver, it seemed to him suddenly that Laliene's scorn for Kleph had not been misplaced, that it was foolish and pathetic and even a little sordid for any Traveler to indulge in such doomed and absurd romances as this. And yet he was on the verge of embarking on the same thing Kleph was doing. Was that what he really wanted? Or should he not leave such adventures to shallow, trivial people like Kleph?

Christine said, "You're looking troubled again."

"It's nothing. Nothing." Thimiroi gazed closely at her, and her warmth, her directness, her radiant joyous eyes, swept away all the sudden doubts that had come to engulf him. He had no right to condemn Kleph. And in any case what he might choose to do, or Kleph, was no concern of Laliene's. "Come," he said. He caught Christine lightly by the arm. "Let's go inside."

Just as he turned, Kleph did also, and for an instant their eyes met as they stood facing each other on opposite sides of the street. She gave him a startled look. Thimiroi smiled to her; but Kleph merely stared back intently in a curiously cold way. Then she was gone. Thimiroi shrugged.

He followed Christine into her house.

It was an old, comfortable-looking place with a great many small, dark, high-ceilinged rooms on the ground floor and a massive wooden staircase leading upstairs. The furnishings looked heavy and unstylish, as though they were already long out of date, but everything had an appealing, well-worn feel.

"My family's lived in this house for almost a hundred years," Christine said, as though reading his mind. "I was born here. I grew up here. I don't know what it's like to live anywhere else." She gestured toward the staircase. "The music room is upstairs."

"I know. Do you live here by yourself?"

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"Basically. My sister and I inherited the house when my mother died, but she's hardly ever here. The last I heard from her, she was in Oaxaca."

"Wah-ha-ka?" Thimiroi said carefully.

"Oaxaca, yes. In Mexico, you know? She's studying Mexican handicrafts, she says. I think she's actually studying Mexican men, but that's her business, isn't it? She likes to travel. Before Mexico she was in Thailand, and before that it was Portugal, I think."

Mexico, Thimiroi thought. Thailand. Portugal. So many names, so many places. Such a complex society, this world of the twentieth century. His own world had fewer places, and they had different names. So much had changed, after the time of the Blue Death. So much had been swept away, never to return.

Christine said, "It's a musty old house, I know. But I love it. And I could never have afforded to buy one of my own. Everything's so fantastically expensive these days. If I hadn't happened to have lived here all along, I suppose I'd be living in one of those poky little studio apartments down by the river, paying umpty thousand dollars a month for one bedroom and a terrace the size of a postage stamp."

Desperately he tried to follow what she was saying. His implant helped, but not enough. Umpty thousand dollars? Studio apartment? Postage stamp? He got the sense of her words, but the literal meanings eluded him. How much was umpty? How big was a postage stamp?

The music room on the second floor was bright and spacious, with three large windows looking out into the garden and the street beyond. The piano itself, against the front wall between two of the windows, was larger than he expected, a splendid, imposing thing, with ponderous, ornately carved legs and a black, gleaming wooden case. Obviously it was old and very valuable and well cared for; and as he studied it he realized suddenly that this must not be any ordinary home musical instrument, but more likely one that a concert performer would use; and therefore Christine's lighthearted dismissal of his question about her having a musical career must almost certainly conceal bitter defeat, frustration, the deflection of a cherished dream. She had wanted and expected more from her music than life had been able to bring her.

"Play for me," he said. "The same piece you were playing the first time, when I happened to walk by."

"The Debussy, you mean?"

"I don't know its name."

Thimiroi hummed the melody that had so captured him. She nodded and sat down to play.

It was not quite as magical, the second time. But nothing ever was, he knew. And it was beautiful all the same, haunting, mysterious in its powerful simplicity.

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"Will you sing for me now?" Christine asked.

"What should I sing?"

"A song of your own country?"

He thought a moment. How could he explain to her what music was like in his own time—not sound alone, but a cluster of all the arts, visual, olfactory, the melodic line rising out of a dozen different sensory concepts? But he could improvise, he supposed. He began to sing one of his own poems, putting a tune to it as he went. Christine, listening, closed her eyes, nodded, turned to the keyboard, played a few notes and a few more, gradually shaping them into an accompaniment for him. Thimiroi was amazed at the swiftness with which she caught the melody of his tune—stumbling only once or twice, over chordal structures that were obviously alien to her—and traveled along easily with it. By the time he reached the fifth cycle of the song, he and she were joined in an elegant harmony, as though they had played this song together many times instead of both improvising it as they went. And when he made the sudden startling key-shift that in his culture signaled the close of a song, she adapted to it almost instantaneously and stayed with him to the final note.

They applauded each other resoundingly.

Her eyes were shining with delight. "Oh, Thimiroi—Thimiroi—what a marvelous singer you are! And what a marvelous song!"

"And how cunningly you wove your accompaniment into it."

"That wasn't really hard."

"For you, perhaps. You have a great musical gift, Christine."

She reddened and looked away.

"What language were you singing in?" she asked, after a time.

"The language of my country."

"It was so strange. It isn't like any language I've ever heard. Why won't you tell me anything about where you come from, Thimiroi?"

"I will. Later."

"And what did the words mean?"

"It's a poem about—about journeying to far lands, and seeing great wonders. A very romantic poem, perhaps a little silly. But the poet himself is also very romantic and perhaps a little silly."

"What's his name?" she asked.

"Thimiroi."

"You?" she said, grinning broadly. "Is that what you are? A poet?"

"I sometimes write poetry, yes," he said, beginning to feel as uneasy as she had seemed when he was trying to praise her playing. They looked at each other awkwardly. Then he said, "May I try the piano?"

"Of course."

He sat down, peered at the keys, touched one of the white ones ex-

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perimentally, then another, another. What were the black ones? Modulators of some sort? No, no, their function was very much like that of the white ones, it seemed. And these pedals here—

He began to play.

He was dreadful at first, but quickly he came to understand the relationship of the notes and the range of the keyboard and the proper way of touching the keys. He played the piece that she had played for him before, exactly at first, then launching into a set of subtle variations that carried him farther and farther from the original, into the musical modes of his own time. The longer he played, the more keenly he appreciated the delicacy and versatility of this ancient instrument; and he knew that if he were to study it with some care, not merely guess his way along as he was doing now, he would be able to draw such wonders from it as even great composers like Cenbe or Palivandrin would find worthwhile. Once again he felt humbled by the achievements of this great lost civilization of the past. Which to brittle, heartless people like Hollia or Omerie must seem a mere simple primitive age. But they understood nothing. Nothing.

He stopped playing, and looked back at Christine.

She was staring at him in horror, her face pale, her eyes wide and stricken, tears streaking her cheeks.

"What's wrong?" he asked.

"The way you play—" she whispered. "I've never heard anyone play like that."

"It is all very bad, I know. But you must realize, I have had no formal training in this instrument, I am simply inventing a technique as I go—"

"No. Please. Don't tell me that. You mustn't tell me that!"

"Christine?"

And then he realized what the matter was. It was not that he had played badly; it was that he had played so well. She had devoted all her life to this instrument, and played it with great skill, and even so had never been able to attain a level of proficiency that gave her any real satisfaction. And he, never so much as having seen a piano in his life, could sit down at it and draw from it splendors beyond her fondest hope of achieving. His playing was unorthodox, of course, it was odd and even bizarre, but yet she had seen the surpassing mastery in it, and had been stunned and chagrined and crushed by it, and stood here now bewildered and confounded by this stranger she had brought into her own home—

I should have known better, Thimiroi thought. I should have realized that this is *her* art, and that I, with all the advantages that are mine purely by virtue of my having been born when I was, ought never to have presumed to invade her special territory with such a display of skills that are beyond her comprehension. Without even suspecting what I was doing, I have humiliated her.

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"Christine," he murmured. "No. No, Christine."

Thimiroi went to her and pulled her close against him, and kissed the tears away, and spoke softly to her, calming her, reassuring her. He could never tell her the truth; but he could make her understand, at least, that he had not meant to hurt her. And after a time he felt the tension leave her, and felt her press herself tight to him, and then their lips met, and she looked up, smiling. And took him lightly by the hand, and drew him from the room and down the hall.

Afterward, as he was dressing, she touched the long, fading red scar on his arm and said, "Were you in some kind of accident?"

"An inoculation," he told her. "Against disease."

"I've never seen one like that before."

"No," he said. "I suppose you haven't."

"A disease of your country?"

"No," he said, after a time. "Of yours."

"But what kind of disease requires a vaccination like—"

"Do we have to talk of diseases just now, Christine."

"Of course not," she said, smiling ruefully. "How foolish of me. How absurd." She ran her fingers lightly, almost fondly, over the inoculation scar a second time. "Of all things for me to be curious about!" Softly she said, "You don't have to leave now, you know."

"But I must. I really must."

"Yes," she said. "I suppose you must." She accompanied him to the front door. "You'll call me, won't you? Very soon?"

"Of course," Thimiroi said.

Night had fallen. The air was mild and humid, but the sky was clear and the stars glittered brilliantly. He looked for the moon but could not find it.

How many days remain, he wondered?

Somewhere out there in the airless dark a lump of dead rock was falling steadily toward earth, falling, falling, inexorably coming this way. How far away was it now? How soon before it would come roaring over the horizon to bring unimaginable death to this place?

I must find a way of saving her, he told himself.

The thought was numbing, dizzying, intolerably disturbing.

Save her? How? Impossible. Impossible. It was something that he must not even allow himself to consider.

And yet—

Again it came. *I must find a way of saving her.*

There was a message for him at his hotel, just a few quick scrawled sentences:

Party at Lutheena's. We're all going. See you there?

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Laliene's handwriting, which even in her haste was as beautiful as the finest calligraphy. Thimiroi crumpled the note and tossed it aside. Going to a party tonight was very close to the last thing he would want to do. Everyone in glittering clothes, making glittering conversation, trading sparkling anecdotes, no doubt, of their latest adventures among the simple sweaty blotchy-skinned folk of this interestingly raucous and crude century—no. No. No. Let them trade their anecdotes without him. Let them sip their euphoriac and exchange their chatter and play their little games. He was going to bed. Very likely, without him there, they would all be talking about him. How oddly he had been behaving, how strange and uncouth he seemed to be becoming since their arrival in this era. Let them talk. What did it matter?

He wished Kleph had not seen him going into Christine's house, though.

But how would Kleph know whose house it was? And why would Kleph—Kleph, with her own Oliver Wilson entanglement preoccupying her—want to say anything to anyone about having seen some other member of the tour slipping away for an intimate hour with a twentieth-century person? Better for her to be silent. The subject was a delicate one. She would not want to raise it. She of all people would be unlikely to disapprove, or to want to bring down on him the disapproval of the others. No, Thimiroi thought. Kleph will say nothing. We are allies in this business, Kleph and I.

He slept, and dark dreams came that he could not abide: the remorseless meteor crossing the sky, the city aflame and shrieking, Christine's wonderful old house swept away by a searing blast of destruction, the piano lying tumbled in the street, split in half, golden strings spilling out.

Wearily Thimiroi dosed himself with the drug that banishes dreams, and lay down to sleep again. But now sleep evaded him. Very well: there was the other drug, the one that brings sleep. He hesitated to take it. The two drugs taken in the wrong order exacted a price; he would be jittery and off balance emotionally for the next two or three days. He was far enough off balance as it was already. So he lay still, hoping that he would drift eventually into sleep without recourse to more medication; and gradually his mind grew easier, gradually he began the familiar descent toward unconsciousness.

Suddenly the image of Laliene blazed in his mind.

It was so vivid that it seemed she was standing beside him in the darkness and light was streaming from her body. She was nude, and her breasts, her hips, her thighs, all had a throbbing incandescent glow. Thimiroi sat up, astonished, swept with waves of startling feverish excitement.

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"Laliene?"

How radiant she looked! How splendid! Her eyes were glowing like beacons. Her crimson hair stood out about her head like a bright corona. The scent of her filled his nostrils. He trembled. His throat was dry, his lips seemed gummed together.

Wave after wave of intense, overpowering desire swept through him.

Helplessly Thimiroi rose, lurched across the room, reached gropingly toward her. This was madness, he knew, but there was no holding himself back.

The shimmering image retreated as he came near it. He stumbled, nearly tripped, regained his balance.

"Wait, Laliene," he cried hoarsely. His heart was pounding thunderously. It was almost impossible for him to catch his breath. He was choking with his need. "Come here, will you? Stop edging away like that."

"I'm not here, Thimiroi. I'm in my own room. Put your robe on and come visit me."

"What? You're not here?"

"Down the hall. Come, now. Hurry!"

"You are here. You have to be."

As though in a daze, brain swathed in thick layers of white cotton, he reached for her again. Like a lovestruck boy he yearned to draw her close, to cup her breasts in his hands, to run his fingers over those silken thighs, those satiny flanks—

"To my room," she whispered.

"Yes. Yes."

His flesh was aflame. Sweat rolled down his body. She danced before him like a shining will-o'-the-wisp. Frantically he struggled to comprehend what was happening. A vision? A dream? But he had drugged himself against dreams. And he was awake now. Surely he was awake. And yet he saw her—he wanted her—he wanted her beyond all measure—he was going to slip his robe on, and go to her suite, and she would be waiting for him there, and he would slip into her bed—into her arms—

No. No. No.

He fought it. He caught the side of some piece of furniture, and held it, anchoring himself, struggling to keep himself from going forward. His teeth chattered. Chills ran along his back and shoulders. The muscles in his arms and chest writhed and spasmed as he battled to stay where he was.

He was fully awake now, and he was beginning to understand. He remembered how Laliene had gone wandering around here the other day while he was brewing the tea—examining the works of art, so he had

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thought. But she could just as easily have been planting something. Which now was broadcasting monstrous compulsions into his mind.

He switched on the light, wincing as it flooded the room. Now Thimiroi could no longer see that mocking, beckoning image of Laliene, but he still felt her presence all around him, the heat of her body, the pungency of her fragrance, the strength of her urgent summons.

Somehow he managed to find the card with Christine's telephone number on it, and dialed it with tense, quivering fingers. The phone rang endlessly until, finally, he heard her sleepy voice, barely focused, saying, "Yes? Hello?"

"Christine? Christine, it's me, Thimiroi."

"What? Who? Don't you know it's four in the morn—" Then her tone changed. The sleepiness left it, and the irritation. "What's wrong, Thimiroi? What's happening?"

"I'll be all right. I need you to talk to me, that's all. I'm having a—kind of an attack."

"No, Thimiroi!" He could feel the intensity of her concern. "What can I do? Shall I come over?"

"No. That's not necessary. Just talk to me. I need to stir up—cerebral activity. Do you understand? It's just an—an electrochemical imbalance. But if I talk—even if I listen to something—speak to me, say anything, recite poetry—"

"Poetry," she said. "All right. Let me think. *'Four score and seven years ago—'* " she began.

"Good," he said. "Even if I don't understand it, that's all right. Say anything. Just keep talking."

Already Laliene's aura was ebbing from the room. Christine continued to speak; and he broke in from time to time, simply to keep his mental level up. In a few minutes Thimiroi knew that he had defeated Laliene's plan. He slumped forward, breathing hard, letting his stiff, anguished muscles uncoil.

He still could feel the waves of mental force sweeping through the room. But they were pallid now, they were almost comical, they no longer were capable of arousing in him the obsessive obedience that they had been able to conjure into his sleeping mind.

Christine, troubled, still wanted to come to him; but Thimiroi told her that everything was fine, now, that she should go back to sleep, that he was sorry to have disturbed her. He would explain, he promised. Later. Later.

Fury overtook him the moment he put the receiver down.

Damn Laliene. Damn her! What did she think she was doing?

He searched through the sitting room, and then the bedroom, and the third room of the suite. But it was almost dawn before he found what he

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was looking for: the tiny silvery pellet, the minute erotic broadcaster, that she had hidden beneath one of his Sipulva tables. He pulled it loose and crushed it against the wall, and the last faint vestige of Laliene's presence went from the room like water swirling down a drain. Slowly Thimiroi's anger receded. He put on some music, one of Cenbe's early pieces, and listened quietly to it until he saw the first pale light of morning streaking the sky.

Casually, easily, with a wonderful recklessness he had not known he had in him, he said to Christine, "We go anywhere we want. Anywhen. They run tours for us, you see. We were in Canterbury in Chaucer's time, to make the pilgrimage. We went to Rome and then to Emperor Augustus' summer palace on the island of Capri, and he invited us to a grand banquet, thinking we were visitors from a great kingdom near India."

Christine was staring at him in a wide-eyed gaze, as though she were a child and he were telling her some fabulous tale of dragons and princes.

He had gone to her at midday, when the late May sun was immense overhead and the sky seemed like a great curving plate of burnished blue steel. She had let him in without a word, and for a long while they looked at each other in silence, their hands barely touching. She was very pale and her eyes were reddened from sleeplessness, with dark crescents beneath them. Thimiroi embraced her, and assured her that he was in no danger, that with her help he had been able to fight off the demon that had assailed him in the night. Then she took him upstairs, to the room on the second floor where they had made love the day before, and drew him down with her on the bed, almost shyly at first, and then, casting all reserve aside, seizing him eagerly, hungrily.

When finally they lay back, side by side, all passion slaked for the moment, Christine turned toward him and said, "Tell me now where your country is, Thimiroi."

And at last he began—calmly, unhesitatingly—to tell her about The Travel.

"We went to Canterbury in the autumn of 1347," he said. "Actually Chaucer was still only a boy, then. The poem was many years away. Of course we read him before we set out. We even looked at the original Old English text. I suppose the language would be strange even to you. *'When that Aprill with his shoures soote/The droghte of March hath perced to the roote.'* I suppose we really should have gone in April ourselves, to be more authentic; but April was wet that year, as it usually is at that time in England, and the autumn was warm and brilliant, a season much like the one you are having here, a true vintage season. We are very fond of warm dry weather, and rain depresses us."

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"You could have gone in another year, then, and found a warmer, drier, April," Christine said.

"No. The year had to be 1347. It isn't important why. And so we went in autumn, in beautiful October."

"Ah."

"We began in London, gathering in an inn on the south side of the river, just as Chaucer's pilgrims did, and we set out with a band of pilgrims that must have been much like his, even one who played a bagpipe the way his Miller did, and a woman who might almost have been the Wife of Bath—" Thimiroi closed his eyes a moment, letting the journey come rushing back from memory, sights and sounds, laughter, barking dogs, cool bitter ale, embroidered gowns, the mounds of straw in the stable, falling leaves, warm dry breezes. "And then, before that, first-century Capri. In the time of Augustus. In high summer, a perfect Mediterranean summer, still another vintage season. How splendid Capri is. Do you know it? No? An island off Italy, very steep, a mountaintop in the water, with strange grottos at its base and huge rocks all about. There comes a time every evening when the sky and the sea are the same color, a pale blue-gray, so that it is impossible to tell where one ends and the other begins, and you stand by the edge of the high cliff, looking outward into that gray haze, and it seems to you that all the world is completely still, that time is not moving at all."

"The—first century—?" Christine murmured.

"The reign of the Emperor Augustus, yes. A surprisingly short man, and very gentle and witty, extremely likable, although you can feel the ruthlessness of him just behind the gentleness. He has amazing eyes, utterly penetrating, with a kind of light coming from them. You look at him and you see Rome: the Empire embodied in one man, its beginning and its end, its greatness and its power."

"You speak of him as though he is still alive. 'He has amazing eyes,' you said."

"I saw him only a few months ago," said Thimiroi. "He handed me a cup of sweet red wine with his own hands, and recommended it, saying there certainly was nothing like it in my own land. He has a palace on Capri, nothing very grand—his stepson Tiberius, who was there also, would build a much greater one later on, so our guide told us—and he was there for the summer. We were guests under false pretenses, I suppose, ambassadors from a distant land, though he never would have guessed *how* distant. The year was—let me think—no, not the first century, not *your* first century, it was what you call B.C., the last century *before* the first century—I think the year was 19, the 19 *before*—such a muddle, these dating systems—"

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"And in your country?" Christine asked. "What year is it now in your country, Thimiroi? 2600? 3100?"

He pondered that a moment. "We use a different system of reckoning. It is not at all analogous. The term would be meaningless to you."

"You can't tell me what year it is there?"

"Not in your kind of numbers, no. There was—a break in the pattern of numbering, long before our time. I could ask Kadro. He is our tour guide, Kadro. He knows how to compute the equivalencies."

She stared at him. "Couldn't you guess? Five hundred years? A thousand?"

"Perhaps it is something like that. But even if I knew, I would not tell you the exact span, Christine. It would be wrong. It is forbidden, absolutely forbidden." Thimiroi laughed. "Everything I have just told you is absolutely forbidden, do you know that? We must conceal the truth about ourselves to those we meet when we undertake The Travel. That is the rule. Of course, you don't believe a thing I've just been telling you, do you?"

Color flared in her cheeks. "Don't you think I do?" she cried.

Tenderly Thimiroi said. "There are two things they tell us about The Travel, Christine, before we set out for the first time. The first, they say, is that sooner or later you will feel some compulsion to reveal to a person of ancient times that you are a visitor from a future time. The second thing is that you will not be believed."

"But I believe you, Thimiroi!"

"Do you? Do you really?"

"Of course it all sounds so terribly strange, so fantastic—"

"Yes. Of course."

"But I want to believe you. And so I do believe you. The way you speak—the way you dress—the way you look—everything about you is *foreign,* Thimiroi, totally foreign beyond any ordinary kind of foreignness. It isn't Iran or India or Afghanistan that you come from, it has to be some other world, or some other time. Yes. Yes. Everything about you. The way you played the piano yesterday." She paused a moment. "The way you touch me in bed. You are like no man I have ever—like no man—" She faltered, reddened fiercely, looked away from him a moment. "Of course I believe that you are what you say you are. Of course I do!"

When he returned to the Montgomery House late that afternoon he went down the hall to Laliene's suite and rapped angrily at the door. Denvin opened it and peered out at him. He was dressed in peacock splendor, an outfit exceptional even for Denvin, a shirt with brilliant red

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stripes and golden epaulets, tight green trousers flecked with scarlet checks.

He gave Thimiroi a long cool malevolent glance and exclaimed, "Well! The prodigal returns!"

"How good to see you, Denvin. Am I interrupting anything?"

"Only a quiet little chat." Denvin turned. "Laliene! Our wandering poet is here!"

Laliene emerged from deeper within. Like Denvin she was elaborately clothed, wearing a pale topaz-hued gown fashioned of a myriad shimmering mirrors, shining metallic eye-shadow, gossamer finger-gloves. She looked magnificent. But for an instant, as her eyes met Thimiroi's, her matchless poise appeared to desert her, and she seemed startled, flustered, almost frightened. Then, regaining her equilibrium with a superb show of control, she gave him a cool smile and said, "So there you are. We tried to reach you before, but of course there was no finding you. Maitira, Antilimoin, and Fevra are here. We've just been with them. They've been holding open house all afternoon, and you were invited. I suppose it's still going on. Lesentru is due to arrive in about an hour, and Kuiane, and they say that Broyal and Hammin will be getting here tonight also."

"The whole clan," Thimiroi said. "That will be delightful. Laliene, may I speak with you privately?"

Again a flicker of distress from her. She glanced almost apologetically at Denvin.

"Well, excuse me!" Denvin said theatrically.

"Please," Laliene said. "For just a moment, Denvin."

"Certainly. Certainly, Laliene." He favored Thimiroi with a strange grimace as he went out.

"Very well," said Laliene, turning to face Thimiroi squarely. Her expression had hardened; she looked steely, now, and prepared for any sort of attack. "What is it, Thimiroi?"

He drew forth the little silvery pellet that he had found attached to the underside of the Sipulva table, and held it out to her in the palm of his hand.

"Do you know what this is, Laliene?"

"Some little broken toy, I assume. Why do you ask?"

"It's an erotic," he said. "I found it in my rooms, where someone had hidden it. It began broadcasting when I went to sleep last night. Sending out practically irresistible waves of sexual desire."

"How fascinating. I hope you were able to find someone to satisfy them with."

"The images I was getting, Laliene, were images of you. Standing

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naked next to my bed, whispering to me, inviting me to come down the hall and make love to you."

She smiled icily. "I had no idea you were still interested, Thimiroi!"

"Don't play games with me. Why did you plant this thing in my room, Laliene?"

"I?"

"I said, don't play games. You were in my room the other day. No one else of our group has been. The erotic was specifically broadcasting your image. How can there be any doubt that you planted it yourself, for the particular purpose of luring me into your bed?"

"You're being absurd, Thimiroi. Anyone could have planted it. Anyone. Do you think it's hard to get into these rooms? These people have no idea of security. You ask a chambermaid in the right way and you can enter anywhere. As for the images of me that were being broadcast to you, why, you know as well as I do that erotics don't broadcast images of specific individuals. They send out generalized waves of feeling, and the recipient supplies whatever image seems appropriate to him. In your case evidently it was my image that came up from your unconscious when—"

"Don't lie to me, Laliene."

Her eyes flashed. "I'm not lying. I deny planting anything in your room. Why on earth would I, anyway? Could going to bed with you, or anyone else, for that matter, possibly be that important to me that I would connive and sneak around and make use of some kind of mechanical amplifying device in order to achieve my purpose? Is that plausible, Thimiroi?"

"I don't know. What I do know is that what happened to me during the night happened to me, and that I found this when I searched my rooms." He thought for a moment to add, *And that you've been pressing yourself upon me ever since we began this trip, in the most embarrassing and irritating fashion.* But he did not have the heart to say that to her. "I believe that you hid this when you visited me for tea. What your reason may have been is something I can't begin to imagine."

"Of course you can't. Because I had no reason. And I didn't do it."

Thimiroi made no reply. Laliene's face was firmly set. Her gaze met his unwaveringly. She was certainly lying: he knew that beyond any question. But they were at an impasse. All he could do was accuse; he could not prove anything; he was stymied by her denial, and there was no way of carrying this further. She appeared to know that also. There was a long tense moment of silence between them, and then she said, "Are you finished with this, Thimiroi? Because there are more important things we should be discussing."

"Go ahead. What important things?"

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"The plans for Friday night."

"Friday night," Thimiroi said, not understanding.

She looked at him scornfully. "Friday—tomorrow—is the last day of May. Or have you forgotten that?"

He felt a chill. "The meteor," he said.

"The meteor, yes. The event which we came to this place to see," Laliene said. "Do you recall?"

"So soon," Thimiroi said dully. "Tomorrow night."

"We will all assemble about midnight, or a little before, at the Sanciscos' house. The view will be best from there, according to Kadro. From their front rooms, upstairs. Kleph, Omerie, and Klia have invited everyone—everyone except Hollia and Hara, that is: Omerie is adamant about their not coming, because of something slippery that Hollia tried to do to him. Kleph would not discuss it, but I assume it had to do with trying to get the Sanciscos evicted, so that they could have the Wilson house for themselves. But all the rest of us will be there. And you are particularly included, Thimiroi. Kleph made a point of telling me that. Unless you have other plans for the evening, naturally."

"Is that what Kleph said? Or are you adding that part of it yourself, about my having other plans?"

"That is what Kleph said."

"I see."

"*Do* you have other plans?"

"What other plans could I possibly have, do you think? Where? With whom?"

Christine seemed startled to see him again so soon. She was still wearing an old pink robe that she had thrown on as he was leaving her house two hours before, and she looked rumpled and drowsy and confused. Behind him the sky held the pearl-gray of early twilight on this late spring evening, but she stood in the half-opened doorway blinking at him as though he had awakened her once again in the middle of the night.

"Thimiroi? You're back?"

"Let me in. Quickly, please."

"Is there something wrong? Are you in trouble?"

"Please."

He stepped past her into the vestibule and hastily pushed the door shut behind him. She gave him a baffled look. "I was just napping," she said. "I didn't think you'd be coming back this evening, and I had so little sleep last night, you know—"

"I know. We need to talk. This is urgent, Christine."

"Go into the parlor. I'll be with you in a moment."

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She pointed to Thimiroi's left and vanished into the dim recesses at the rear of the entrance hall. Thimiroi went into the room she had indicated, a long, oppressively narrow chamber hung with heavy brocaded draperies and furnished with the sort of low-slung clumsy-looking couches and chairs, probably out of some even earlier era, that were everywhere in the house. He paced restlessly about the room. It was like being in a museum of forgotten styles. There was something eerie and almost hieratic about this mysterious furniture: the dark wood, the heavy legs jutting at curious angles, the coarse, intricately worked fabric, the strange brass buttons running along the edges. Someone like Denvin would probably think it hideous. To him it was merely strange, powerful, haunting, wonderful in its way.

At last Christine appeared. She had been gone for what felt like hours: washing her face, brushing her hair, changing into a robe she evidently considered more seemly for receiving a visitor at nightfall. Her vanity was almost amusing. The world is about to come to an end, he thought, and she pauses to make herself fit for entertaining company.

But of course she could have no idea of why he was here.

He said, "Are you free tomorrow night?"

"Free? Tomorrow?" She looked uncertain. "Why—yes, yes, I suppose. Friday night. I'm free, yes. What did you have in mind, Thimiroi?"

"How well do you trust me, Christine?"

She did not reply for a moment. For the first time since that day they had had lunch together at the River Cafe, there was something other than fascination, warmth, even love for him, in her eyes. She seemed mystified, troubled, perhaps frightened. It was as if his sudden breathless arrival here this evening had reminded her of how truly strange their relationship was, and of how little she really knew about him.

"Trust you how?" she said finally.

"What I told you this afternoon, about Capri, about Canterbury, about The Travel—did you believe all that or not?"

She moistened her lips. "I suppose you're going to say that you were making it all up, and that you feel guilty now for having fed all that nonsense to a poor simple gullible woman like me."

"No."

"No what?"

"I wasn't making anything up. But do you believe that, Christine? Do you?"

"I said I did, this afternoon."

"But you've had a few hours to think about it. Do you still believe it?"

She made no immediate reply. At length she said, glancing at him warily, "I've been napping, Thimiroi. I haven't been thinking about anything at all. But since it seems to be so important to you: Yes. Yes, I

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think that what you told me, weird as it was, was the truth. There. If it was just a joke, I swallowed it. Does that make me a simpleton in your eyes?"

"So you trust me."

"Yes. I trust you."

"Will you go away with me, then? Leave here with me tomorrow, and possibly never come back?"

"Tomorrow?" The word seemed to have struck her like an explosion. She looked dazed. "Never—come—back—?"

"In all likelihood."

She put the palms of her hands together, rubbed them against each other, pressed them tight: a little ritual of hers, perhaps. When she looked up at him again her expression had changed: the confusion had cleared from her face and now she appeared merely puzzled, and even somewhat irritated.

In a sharp tone she said, "What is all this about, Thimiroi?"

He drew a deep breath. "Do you know why we chose the autumn of 1347 for our Canterbury visit?" he asked. "Because it was a season of extraordinarily fine weather, yes. But also because it was a peak time, looking down into a terrible valley, the last sweet moment before the coming of a great calamity. By the following summer the Black Death would be devouring England, and millions would die. We chose the timing of our visit to Augustus the same way. The year 19—19 B.C., it was—was the year he finally consolidated all imperial power in his grasp. Rome was his; he ruled it in a way that no one had ruled that nation before. After that there would be only anticlimax for him, and disappointments and losses; and indeed just after we went to him he would fall seriously ill, almost to the edge of death, and for a time it would seem to him that he had lost everything in the very moment of attaining it. But when we visited him in 19 B.C., it was the summit of his time."

"What does this have to do with—"

"This May, here, now, is another vintage season, Christine. This long golden month of unforgettable weather—it will end tomorrow, Christine, in terror, in destruction, a frightful descent from happiness into disaster, far steeper than either of the other two. That is why we are here, do you see? As spectators, as observers of the great irony—visiting your city at its happiest moment, and then, tomorrow, watching the catastrophe."

As he spoke, she grew pale and her lips began to quiver; and then color flooded into her face, as it will sometimes do when the full impact of terrible news arrives. Something close to panic was gleaming in her eyes.

"Are you saying that there's going to be nuclear war? That after all these years the bombs are finally going to go off?"

"Not war, no."

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"What then?"

Without answering, Thimiroi drew forth his wallet and began to stack currency on the table in front of him, hundreds of dollars, perhaps thousands, all the strange little strips of green-and-black paper that they had supplied him with when he first had arrived here. Christine gaped in astonishment. He shoved the money toward her.

"Here," he said. "I'll get more tomorrow morning, and give you that too. Arrange a trip for us to some other country, France, Spain, England, wherever you'd like to go, it makes no difference which one, so long as it is far from here. You will understand how to do such things, with which I have had no experience. Buy airplane tickets—is that the right term, airplane tickets?—get us a hotel room, do whatever is necessary. But we must depart no later than this time tomorrow. When you pack, pack as though you may never return to this house: take your most precious things, the things you would not want to leave behind, but only as much as you can carry yourself. If you have money on deposit, take it out, or arrange for it to be transferred to some place of deposit in the country that we will be going to. Call me when everything is ready, and I'll come for you and we'll go together to the place where the planes take off."

Her expression was frozen, her eyes glazed, rigid. "You won't tell me what's going to happen?"

"I have already told you vastly too much. If I tell you more—and you tell others—and the news spreads widely, and the pattern of the future is greatly changed by the things that those people may do as a result of knowing what is to come—no. No. I do not dare, Christine. You are the only one I can save, and I can tell you no more than I have already told you. And you must tell no one else at all."

"This is like a dream, Thimiroi."

"Yes. But it is very real, I assure you."

Once again she stared. Her lips worked a moment before she could speak.

"I'm so terribly afraid, Thimiroi."

"I understand that. But you do believe me? Will you do as I ask? I swear to you, Christine, your only hope lies in trusting me. *Our* only hope."

"Yes," she said hesitantly.

"Then will you do as I ask?"

"Yes," she said, beginning the single syllable with doubt in her voice, and finishing it with sudden conviction. "But there's something I don't understand."

"What is that?"

"If something awful is going to happen here, why must we run off to

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England or Spain? Why not take me back to your own country, Thimiroi? Your own time."

"There is no way I can do that," he said softly.

"When you go back, then, what will happen to me?"

He took her hand in his. "I will not go back, Christine. I will stay here with you, in this era—in England, in France, wherever we may go—for the rest of my life. We will both be exiles. But we will be exiles together."

She asked him to stay with her at her house that night, and he refused. He could see that the refusal hurt her deeply; but there was much that he needed to do, and he could not do it there. They would have many other nights for spending together. Returning to his hotel, he went quickly to his rooms to contemplate the things that would have to be dealt with.

Everything that belonged to his own era, of course, packed and sent back via his suitcase: no question about that. He could keep some of his clothing with him here, perhaps, but none of the furniture, none of the artifacts, nothing that might betray the technology of a time yet unborn. The room would have to be bare when he left it. And he would have to requisition more twentieth-century money. He had no idea how much Christine might have above what he had already given her, nor how long it would last; but certainly they would need more as they began their new lives. As for the suitcase, his one remaining link to the epoch from which he came, he would have to destroy that. He would have to sever all ties. He would—

The telephone rang. The light jingling of its bell cut across his consciousness like a scream.

Christine, he thought. To tell him that she had reconsidered, that she saw now that this was all madness, that if he did not leave her alone she would call the police—

"Yes?" he said.

"Thimiroi! Oh, I *am* glad you're there." A warm, hearty, familiar masculine voice. "Laliene said I might have difficulty finding you, but I thought I'd ring your room anyway "

"Antilimoin?"

"None other. We've just arrived. Ninth floor, the Presidential suite, whatever that may be. Maitira and Fevra are here with me, of course. Listen, old friend, we're having a tremendous blast tonight—oh, pardon me, that's a sick thing to say, isn't it?—a tremendous gathering, you know, a *soiree,* to enliven the night before the big night—do you think you can make it?"

"Well—"

"Laliene says you've been terribly standoffish lately, and I suppose

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she's right. But look, old friend, you can't spend the evening moping by yourself, you absolutely can't. Lesentru'll be here, do you know that? And Kuiane. Maybe even Broyal and Hammin, later on. And a rumor of Cenbe, too, though I suspect he won't show up until the very last minute, as usual. Listen, there are all sorts of stories to tell. You were in Canterbury, weren't you? And we've just done the Charlemagne thing. We have some splendid tips on what to see and what to avoid. You'll come, of course. Room 941, the end of the hall."

"I don't know if I—"

"Of course you will! Of course!"

Antilimoin's gusto was irresistible. It always was. The man was a ferociously social being: when he gave a party, attendance was never optional. And Thimiroi realized, after a moment, that it was better, perhaps, for him to go than to lurk here by himself, tensely awaiting the ordeals that tomorrow would bring. He had already brought more than enough suspicion upon himself. Antilimoin's party would be his farewell to his native time, to his friends, to everything that had been his life.

He spent a busy hour planning what had to be planned.

Then he dressed in his formal best—in the clothes, in fact, that he had planned to wear tomorrow night—and went upstairs. The party was going at full force. Antilimoin, dapper and elegant as always, greeted him with a hearty embrace, and Fevra and Maitira came gliding up from opposite sides of the room to kiss him, and Thimiroi saw, farther away, Lesentru and Kuiane deep in conversation with Lutheena, Denvin, and some others. Everyone seemed buoyant, excited, energetic. There was tension, too, the undercurrent of keen excitement that comes on the eve of a powerful experience. Voices were pitched a little too high, gestures were a trifle too emphatic. A great screen on one wall was playing one of Cenbe's finest symphonias, but no one seemed to be watching or listening. Thimiroi glanced at it and shivered. Cenbe, of course: that connoisseur of disaster, assembling his masterpieces out of other people's tragedies—he was the perfect artist for this event. Doubtless he was in the city already, skulking around somewhere looking for the material he would need to complete his newest and surely finest work.

I will never see any of these people again after tonight, Thimiroi thought, and the concept was so difficult to accept that he repeated it to himself two or three more times, without being able to give it any more reality.

Laliene appeared beside him. There was no sign on her face of the earlier unpleasantness between them; her eyes were glowing and she was smiling warmly, even tenderly, as though they were lovers.

"I'm glad you came," she murmured. "I hoped you would."

"Antilimoin is very persuasive."

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"You must have some tea. You look so tense, Thimiroi."

"Do I?"

"Is it because of our talk before?"

He shrugged. "Let's forget all about that, shall we?"

Laliene let the tips of her fingers rest lightly on his arm. "I should never have put that transmitter in your room. It was utterly stupid of me."

"It was, yes. But that's all ancient history."

Her face rose toward his. "Come have some tea with me."

"Laliene—"

Softly she said, "I wanted you to come to me so very badly. That was why I did it. You were ignoring me—you've ignored me ever since this trip began—oh, Thimiroi, Thimiroi, I'm trying to do the right thing, don't you see? And I want you to do the right thing too."

"What are you trying to tell me, Laliene?"

"Be careful, is what I'm trying to tell you."

"Careful of what?"

"Have some tea with me," she said.

"I'll have some tea," he told her. "But not, I think, with you."

Tears welled in her eyes. She turned her head to the side, but not so quickly that Thimiroi did not see them.

That was new, he thought. Tears in Laliene's eyes! He had never known her to be so overwrought. Too much euphoriac, he wondered? She kept her grip on his arm for a long moment, and then, smiling sadly, she released him and moved away.

"Thimiroi!" Lesentru called, turning and grinning broadly at him and waving his long thin arms. "How absolutely splendid to see you! Come, come, let's sip a little together!" He crossed the room as if swimming through air. "You look so gloomy, man! That can't be allowed. Lutheena! Fevra! Everybody! We must cheer Thimiroi up! We can't let anyone go around looking as bleak as this, not tonight."

They swept toward him from every direction, six, eight, ten of them, laughing, whooping, embracing him, holding fragrant cups of euphoriac tea out at him. It began almost to seem that the party was in his honor. Why were they making such a fuss over him? He was starting to regret having come here at all. He drank the tea that someone put in his hand, and almost at once there was another cup there. He drank that too.

Laliene was at his side again. Thimiroi was having trouble focusing his eyes.

"What did you mean?" he asked. "When you said to be careful."

"I'm not supposed to say. It would be improperly influencing the flow of events."

"Be improper, then. But stop talking in riddles."

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"Are they such riddles, then?"

"To me they are."

"I think you know what I'm talking about," Laliene said.

"I do?"

They might have been all alone in the middle of the room. I have had too much euphoriac, he told himself. But I can still hold my own. I can still hold my own, yes.

Laliene said in a low whisper, leaning close, her breath warm against his cheek, "Tomorrow—where are you going to go tomorrow, Thimiroi?"

He looked at her, astounded, speechless.

"I know," she said.

"Get away from me."

"I've known all along. I've been trying to save you from—"

"You're out of your mind, Laliene."

"No, Thimiroi. *You* are!"

She clung to him. Everyone was gaping at them.

Terror seized him. I have to get out of here, he thought. Now. Go to Christine. Help her pack, and go with her to the airport. Right now. Whatever time it is, midnight, one in the morning, whatever. Before they can stop me. Before they *change* me.

"No, Thimiroi," Laliene cried. "Please—please—"

Furiously he pushed her away. She went sprawling to the floor, landing in a flurried heap at Antilimoin's feet. Everyone was yelling at once.

Laliene's voice came cutting through the confusion. "Don't do it, Thimiroi! *Don't do it!*"

He swung around and rushed toward the door, and through it, and wildly down the stairs, and through the quiet hotel lobby and out into the night. A brilliant crescent moon hung above him, and behind it the cold blaze of the stars in the clear darkness. Looking back, he saw no pursuers. He headed up the street toward Christine's, walking swiftly at first, then breaking into a light trot.

As he reached the corner, everything swirled and went strange around him. He felt a pang of inexplicable loss, and a sharp stab of wild fear, and a rush of anger without motive. The darkness closed bewilderingly around him, like a great glove. Then came a feeling of motion, swift and impossible to resist. He had a sense of being swept down a vast river toward an abyss that lay just beyond.

The effect lasted only a moment, but it was an endless moment, in which Thimiroi perceived the passage of time in sharp discontinuous segments, a burst of motion followed by a deep stillness and then another burst, and then stillness again. All color went from the world, even the muted colors of night: the sky was a startling blinding white, the buildings about him were black.

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His eyes ached. His head was whirling.

He tried to move, but his movements were jerky and futile, as though he were fighting his way on foot through a deep tank of water. It must be the euphoriac, he told himself. I have had much too much. But I have had too much before, and I have never felt anything like—like—

Then the strangeness vanished as swiftly as it had come.

Everything was normal again, the whiteness gone from the sky, time flowing as it had always flowed, and he was running smoothly, steadily down the street, like some sort of machine, arms and legs pumping, head thrown back.

Christine's house was dark. He rang the bell, and when there was no answer he hammered on the door.

"Christine! Christine, it's me, Thimiroi! Open the door, Christine! Hurry! Please!"

There was no response. He pounded on the door again.

This time a light went on upstairs.

"Here," he called. "I'm by the front door!"

Her window opened. Christine looked out and down at him.

"Who are you? What do you want? Do you know what time it is?"

"Christine!"

"Go away."

"But—Christine—"

"You have exactly two seconds to get away from here, whoever you are. Then I'm calling the police." Her voice was cold and angry. "They'll sober you up fast enough."

"Christine, I'm *Thimiroi.*"

"Who? What kind of name is that? I don't know anybody by that name. I've never seen you before in my life." The window slammed shut. The light went out above him. Thimiroi stood frozen, amazed, dumbstruck.

Then he began to understand.

Laliene said, "We all knew, yes. We were told before we ever came here. Nothing is secret to those who operate The Travel. How could it be? They move freely through all of time. They see everything. We were warned in Canterbury that you were going to try an intervention, and that there would be a counter-intervention if you did. So I tried to stop you. To prevent you from getting yourself into trouble."

"By throwing your body at me?" Thimiroi said bitterly.

"By getting you to fall in love with me," she said. "So that you wouldn't want to get involved with *her.*"

He shook his head in wonder. "All along, throughout the whole trip. Everything you did, aimed at ensnaring me into a romance, just as I

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thought. What I didn't realize was that you were simply trying to save me from myself."

"Yes."

"I suppose you didn't try hard enough," Thimiroi said. "No. No, that isn't it. You tried too hard."

"Did I?"

"Perhaps that was it. At any rate I didn't want you, not at any point. I wanted her the moment I saw her. It couldn't have been avoided, I suppose."

"I'm sorry, Thimiroi."

"That you failed?"

"That you have done such harm to yourself."

He stood there wordlessly for a time. "What will happen to me now?" he asked finally.

"You'll be sent back for rehabilitation, Kadro says."

"When?"

"It's up to you. You can stay and watch the show with the rest of us—you've paid for it, after all. There's no harm, Kadro says, in letting you remain in this era another few hours. Or you can let them have you right now."

For an instant despair engulfed him. Then he regained his control.

"Tell Kadro that I think I'll go now," he said.

"Yes," said Laliene. "That's probably the wisest thing."

He said, "Will Kleph be punished too?"

"I don't think so."

He felt a surge of anger. "Why not? Why is what I did any different from what she did? All right, I had a twentieth-century lover. So did Kleph. You know that. That Wilson man."

"It was different, Thimiroi."

"Different? How?"

"For Kleph it was just a little diversion, an illicit adventure. What she was doing was wrong, but it didn't imperil the basic structure of things. She doesn't propose to save this Wilson. She isn't going to intervene with the pattern. You were going to run off with yours, weren't you? Live with her somewhere far from here, spare her from the calamity, possibly change all time to come? That couldn't be tolerated, Thimiroi. I'm astonished that you thought it would be. But of course you were in love."

Thimiroi was silent again. Then he said, "Will you do me one favor, at least?"

"What is that?"

"Send word to her. Her name's Christine Rawlins. She lives in the big old house right across the street from the one where the Sanciscos are. Tell her to go somewhere else tonight—to move into the Montgomery

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House, maybe, or even to leave the city. She can't stay where she is. Her house is almost certainly right in the path of—of—"

"I couldn't possibly do that," Laliene said quietly.

"No?"

"It would be intervention. It's the same thing you're being punished for."

"She'll die, though!" Thimiroi cried. "She doesn't deserve that. She's full of life, full of hopes, dreams—"

"She's been dead for hundreds of years," said Laliene coolly. "Giving her another day or two of life now won't matter. If the meteor doesn't get her, the plague will. You know that. You also know that I can't intervene for her. And you know that even if I tried, she'd never believe me. She'd have no reason to. No matter what you may have told her before, she knows nothing of it now. There's been a counter-intervention, Thimiroi. You understand that, don't you? She's never known you, now. Whatever may have happened between you and she has been unhappened."

Laliene's words struck him like knives.

"So you won't do a thing?"

"I can't," she said. "I'm sorry, Thimiroi. I tried to save you from this. For friendship's sake. For love's sake, even. But of course you wouldn't be swerved at all."

Kadro came into the room. He was dressed for the evening's big event already.

"Well?" he said. "Has Laliene explained the arrangement? You can stay on through tonight, or you can go back now."

Thimiroi looked at him, and back at Laliene, and to Kadro again. It was all very clear. He had gambled and lost. He had tried to do a foolish, romantic, impossible sort of thing, a twentieth-century sort of thing, for he was in many ways a twentieth-century sort of man; and it had failed, as of course, he realized now, it had been destined to do from the start. But that did not mean it had not been worth attempting. Not at all. Not at all.

"I understand," Thimiroi said. "I'll go back now."

The chairs had all been arranged neatly before the windows in the upstairs rooms. It was past midnight. There was euphoria in the air, thick and dense. A quarter moon hung over the doomed city, but it was almost hidden now by the thickening clouds. The long season of clear skies was ending. The weather was changing, finally.

"It will be happening very soon now," Omerie said.

Laliene nodded. "I feel almost as though I've lived through it several times already."

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"The same with me," said Kleph.

"Perhaps we have," said Klia, with a little laugh. "Who knows? We go round and round in time, and maybe we travel over the same paths more than once."

Denvin said, "I wonder where Thimiroi is now. And what they're doing to him."

"Let's not talk of Thimiroi," Antilimoin said. "It's too sad."

"He won't be able to Travel again, will he?" asked Maitira.

"Never again. Absolutely forbidden," Omerie said. "But he'll be lucky if that's the worst thing they throw at him. What he did was unforgivable. Unforgivable!"

"Antilimoin's right," said Laliene. "Let's not talk of Thimiroi."

Kleph moved closer to her. "You love him, don't you?"

"Loved," Laliene said.

"Here. Some more tea."

"Yes. Yes." Laliene smiled grimly. "He wanted me to send a warning to that woman of his, do you know? She lives right across the way. Her house will be destroyed by the shock wave, almost certainly."

Lutheena said, looking shocked, "You didn't think of doing it, did you?"

"Of course not. But I feel so sad about it, all the same. He loved her, you know. And I loved him. And so, for his sake, entirely for his sake—" Laliene shook her head. "But of course it was inconceivable. I suppose she's asleep right at this minute, not even suspecting—"

"Better the meteor than the Blue Death that follows," said Omerie. "Quicker. The quick deaths are the good ones. What's the point of hiding from the meteor only to die of the plague?"

"This is too morbid," Klia said. "I almost wish we hadn't come here. We could have skipped it and just gone on to Charlemagne's coronation—"

"We'll be there soon enough," said Kleph. "But we're here, now. And it's going to be wonderful—wonderful—"

"Places, everybody!" Kadro called. "It's almost time! Ten—nine—eight—"

Laliene held her breath. This all seemed so familiar, she thought. In a moment the impact, and the tremendous sound, and the first flames rising, and the first stunned cries from the city, and the dark shapes moving around in the distance, blind, bewildered—and then the lurid sky, red as blood, the long unending shriek coming as though from a single voice—

"Now," said Kadro.

There was an astounding stillness overhead. The onrushing meteor might almost have been sucking all sound from the city toward which it plummeted. And after the silence the cataclysmic crash, the incredible impact, the earth itself recoiling with the force of the collision.

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Poor Thimiroi, Laliene thought. And that poor woman, too.

Her heart overflowed with love and sorrow, and her eyes filled with tears, and she turned away from the window, unable to watch, unable to see. Then came the cries. And then the flames. ●

NEXT ISSUE

Next month hot new writer **Victor Milán** takes us aloft to a Japanese space colony struggling to survive in the chaotic days after World War Four, and spins a hard-edged tale of computer piracy, corporate intrigue, cultural identity, and terrorism, in our suspenseful April cover story, "The Floating World." New writer **Richard Paul Russo** then takes us even further ahead in time and to more-distant reaches of space, in "More Than Night," a brilliant evocation of an alien-dominated future world where humans must struggle for existence in the interstices of an inimical society, and one man is driven to set forth on a journey to a destination strange almost beyond imagining—with no guarantee that he can ever return! Nebula-winner **Nancy Kress** then takes us back to the present-day world for a funny but deeply moving study of friendship, faith, hard choices, and "The Price of Oranges"—bittersweet and brilliant, this will certainly be one of the major stories of the year, and may be Kress's best work yet; don't miss it.

ALSO IN APRIL: **Isaac Asimov** returns to unravel a baffling scientific mystery, in "The Smile of the Chipper"; new writer **Sage Walker** makes her *IAsfm* debut with a fascinating study of the interface between myth and reality, in "Indian Giving"; **Lawrence Watt-Evans,** fresh from winning a Hugo for "Why I left Harry's All-Night Hamburgers," published here in 1987, returns with another enchanting tale of far worlds and far-travelers, this one the whimsical saga of "Windwagon Smith and the Martians"; critically-acclaimed writer **Jack Dann** returns after too long an absence with the harrowing story of a man struggling against overwhelming odds in a desperate attempt to change the past, in "Kaddish"; new writer **Deborah Wessell** makes *her IAsfm* debut with a slyly-witty tale of love and loss in a decidedly-odd future society, in "The Last One to Know"; and Nebula-winner **Gregory Benford** unfolds a chilling Alternate History scenario for us, one that demonstrates that, in spite of everything, "We Could Do Worse." Plus an array of columns and features. Look for our April issue on sale on your newsstand on March 7, 1988.

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ON BOOKS by Norman Spinrad

CYBERPUNK REVISITED

In the May 1986 issue of this magazine, I published a column called "The Neuromantics," a piece about the then nascent Cyberpunk movement, with a passing attempt to change the name thereof, which, as we all now know, was to prove entirely futile.

Since then, of course, William Gibson's *Neuromancer,* the novel that started it all, won a raft of awards, Cabana Boys Productions bought the film rights and spent big bucks promoting the novel, its author, and the "Cyberpunk" concept, pieces appeared in places as diverse as *Rolling Stone* and the *Wall Street Journal,* and Cyberpunk became the first real literary movement within SF since the New Wave of the 1960s, and the very first to emerge from within SF into the general public consciousness.

Along the way, it became a Movement with a big capital M. It acquired a chief theoretician in the person of Bruce Sterling. It spawned a critical journal called *Cheap Truth.* It coalesced into a core group of writers who self-consciously considered themselves "The Movement" and for a time called themselves just that—Gibson, Sterling, John Shirley, Rudy Rucker, Lewis Shiner.

Then Gibson at least attempted to disown the leadership of any such Movement, Rucker published a crazed manifesto or two declaring that he was now founding the "Free-form Movement," *Cheap Truth* ceased publication, Sterling took to proclaiming that he was simply a science fiction writer, people declared Cyberpunk dead, and other people declared it had never existed.

All in the space of about four years! Phew!

What really happened?

Did The Movement ever really exist?

If it didn't, what was the Cyberpunk brouhaha all about?

If it did, is Cyberpunk dead?

If it's dead, then what died, and has its passage left any lasting influence?

The present period would seem to be an excellent moment to catch our breath, look back, look forward, and try to figure out what it's all been about, for in 1988, four years since the publication of *Neuromancer* started it all, all five of the core "Movement" writers have

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published new novels, and for works by writers who so recently were proclaiming themselves a Movement, they are surprisingly diverse, perhaps even amazingly so.

Of the five, only William Gibson's *Mona Lisa Overdrive* and perhaps by a long stretch of the imagination Rudy Rucker's *Wetware,* are at all recognizable as anything that anyone could call "Cyberpunk." John Shirley's *A Splendid Chaos,* Bruce Sterling's *Islands in the Net,* and Lewis Shiner's *Deserted Cities of the Heart* are not only a far cry from "Cyberpunk," they are all major departures from anything these writers have previously written.

If *Mona Lisa Overdrive* isn't a "Cyberpunk" novel then nothing ever was or could have been, seeing as how it is the sequel to *Count Zero,* which was the sequel to *Neuromancer,* the archetypal model that started it all.

All Gibson's formidable strengths as a writer, and yes, specifically as a *science fiction* writer, are displayed here. His uncanny ability to place the reader quickly within a scene using a few well-chosen multisensory images. The sophistication with which he is able to evoke foreign locales he may or may not have actually visited and the detailed conviction with which he is able to extrapolate their social and cultural futures from a groundlevel perspective. The naturalistic and believable dialogue. The well-rounded characters from multiple social levels. And while the claim of some that his invocation of "Cyberspace" is hardly that of a sophisticated hacker is not disproven here, Gibson proves once again that he sure as shit knows his neurochemistry and psychopharmacology.

On these levels, *Mona Lisa Overdrive* is another bravura performance.

Alas, so is building a full scale model of the Eiffel Tower out of toothpicks, which is to say that while the technical mastery of the medium displayed may indeed be impressive, the significance of the artistic achievement is severely limited by the content of the message.

The problem, of course, is that *Mona Lisa Overdrive* is the third book of a trilogy. *Neuromancer* had such an impact in large part because what Gibson was doing was so fresh and new—the attitude towards streetlevel technology, the fusion of underclass with hacker, the city-hopping, the Japanese influence, the streetwise sensibility combined with worldly sophistication, the confrontations of characters from divergent classes. Two books later in the same universe, the most original milieu can only seem familiar.

That's why even the most fascinating world-building conceivable combined with the most skilled and powerful writing simply cannot successfully carry the second, let alone the third, book of a trilogy. Only two elements can really do

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that, to the extent that it can be done at all—character and story.

And this leaves the best of writers with a paradoxical set of choices. If they choose to tell a powerful and well-structured story that bridges the entire trilogy, none of the individual novels will be formally whole, and only the last one can have a truly satisfying closure. If they choose to tell three satisfying self-contained stories, it would seem that they must rely on continuing characters to carry the trilogy, and in that direction lies the risk of the descent to literary episodic television.

To his credit, Gibson seems to have realized this, and what he has done with *Count Zero* and *Mona Lisa Overdrive* is opt for a formal strategy that is rare indeed, that only Cordwainer Smith has really successfully carried off, at least within the SF canon.

Virtually everything that Cordwainer Smith wrote was set in the same complex and fascinating future. He only wrote one novel and that was something of a cobble-job; his main form was the novelette. Each novelette he wrote told an entirely free-standing story, more often that not quite a powerful one. What made his ouevre greater than the sum of its parts is the same thing that kept it from becoming a repetitive set of stories simply set in the same universe. Each novelette was entirely free-standing, with its own cast of characters, its own self-contained story, its own satisfying closure, but many of the stories were interrelated in diverse and curious ways. The central story of one might be an ancient legend in another. A major character in one novelette might do a cameo walk-on in some other story. A former spear-carrier might become a star, and vice versa. The same events might be flip-flopped through altered moral shading.

What Smith did with a long series of novelettes, Gibson has attempted with a trilogy of novels. In *Count Zero,* he kept the milieu of *Neuromancer,* re-used some of the characters, but made a new cast of characters central, and then did the same thing again in *Mona Lisa Overdrive.* So, for instance, Case, the lead figure in *Neuromancer,* rates only a passing one line mention by the time we get to *Mona Lisa Overdrive;* Bobby, the "Count Zero" who was central in that novel, is comatose for most of *Mona Lisa;* Molly, Case's lady love in *Neuromancer,* reappears as Sally, and new central characters carry most of the story in the third novel.

To make things more interesting as well as a good deal more confusing, in this universe the protoplasmically deceased may have Cyberspace, so that some important characters, such as 3Jane and the Finn from the first two books in the trilogy, are dead throughout *Mona Lisa Overdrive,* or anyway sort of.

This is formally quite similar to what Cordwainer Smith was up to, but with two significant differences. Most obviously, Gibson is

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trying to do with three novels what Smith did with a long series of novelettes.And what made Cordwainer Smith's interrelated novelettes an overall masterpiece was that they had no order.

Which is to say you could read them in *any* order. You did not have to read any of them first to make sense of any of the others. The more of them you read, the better the next one became because of the layers of resonance, but this effect worked no matter what order you read them in. Smith somehow succeeded in making the whole thing holographic.

Gibson does not.

I have read *Neuromancer, Count Zero,* and *Mona Lisa Overdrive* in the proper order, and even so, much of the storyline of *Mona Lisa* is still so cryptic to me that it would be futile to even try to summarize it. The problem was not nearly so bad between *Neuromancer* and *Count Zero,* but it was still there. What someone who had not read the first two books would make of *Mona Lisa Overdrive* is hard for me to imagine. But I have the uneasy feeling that such a reader might end up throwing the book across the room.

As he did in *Count Zero,* Gibson admirably builds up a complex free-standing story using a mixture of new and old characters, a multi-viewpoint plotline that slowly converges towards a collective interrelated denouement for about two-thirds of the novel. As in *Count Zero,* a reader who had not read anything by Gibson before could, this far, thoroughly enjoy *Mona Lisa Overdrive* as a free-standing novel, and a reader familiar with what had gone before would not be bored by repetition. You can ask nothing more from a trilogy.

But as Gibson enters the concluding sections of *Mona Lisa Overdrive,* the whole thing begins to unravel. 3Jane, or her cybernetic ghost, from the first two books, turns out to be behind much of the complex machiavellian plotline, and if you haven't read the first two novels, it's virtually impossible to figure out who or what she is and what's really going on. The Finn, another software ghost from the previous books, plays a key part. Bobby, who never wakes up in *Mona Lisa,* and Angie, his lover from *Count Zero,* go off into a kind of software heaven together, and if you haven't read *Count Zero,* this has very little resonance as a grand finale, and the whole business with the voodoo spirits in Cyberspace remains hopelessly obscure.

Talk about deus ex machina resolutions! In *Mona Lisa Overdrive,* Gibson does it quite literally and multiplexly. Indeed, the novel and the trilogy end with three cybernetic ghosts on their way to extrasolar Cyberspace.

What went wrong here? Why did a writer as good as Gibson fail to pull this form off where Cordwainer Smith succeeded so admirably?

Well, for one thing, Smith was working with much smaller fictional units and many more of

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them—three novels are not dozens of novelettes. And for another thing, in the final analysis, the forms that Smith and Gibson were using were *not* the same in one crucial respect.

Smith's series was open-ended, holographic, and non-linear. He was creating a consistent universe and many of the stories he set in it gained resonance from the others, but there was never any backstory that had to be digested by the reader. The Smith ouevre works like a fugue, or, as has been pointed out by more than one critic, like a huge Wagnerian opera enriched by an abundance of leitmotifs.

But Gibson was clearly writing a linear trilogy, or rather, perhaps, two sequels to what was originally conceived as a single novel. The formal strategy he used to make *Count Zero* stand on its own while still resonating to *Neuromancer* worked rather well, but by the time he got to *Mona Lisa Overdrive,* the process was, perforce, twice removed, the resonances therefore attenuated, and the weight of the backstory far too much for the book to bear. If *Mona Lisa* had succeeded as a free-standing novel, it could not have provided a satisfactory closure for the series, and by attempting to make it a satisfactory closure for the series, Gibson turned its resolution into something perilously close to gibberish from the point of view of anyone who had not read the first two books.

What does this say about Cyberpunk? Well, at the very least it would seem to say that William Gibson has been quite wise to eschew further leadership of any such Movement at this stage of the game. It would be tragic if a writer as technically skillful, well-rounded, and sophisticated as Gibson became trapped in the endless and increasingly attenuated re-writing of the material that first made his reputation, as so many SF writers have. And to his credit and perhaps ultimately his literary salvation, from the statements Gibson has been making, it would seem that he, unlike so many other writers in a similar position, knows it.

Rudy Rucker has also "defected" from the "Movement" and declared that he is writing something called "freeform" and not "Cyberpunk." After having read a couple of his manifestoes on the subject, I still couldn't quite figure out what the hell he was talking about, but after reading *Wetware,* god help me, my brain may have burned out to the point where it's actually starting to make sense.

Wetware is also a sequel, in this case to *Software,* but somehow in this case it doesn't seem to matter much at all, since so much is going on that knowing what went on before seems almost entirely irrelevant.

A phrase from Alexei Panshin's critical book *Science Fiction in Dimension* springs to mind. In the future, Panshin predicted there, people will write "science fiction that *knows* it's science fiction."

And that would seem to be just what Rudy Rucker is doing.

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The plot of *Wetware* is reminiscent of Henry Kuttner writing as Lewis Padgett or vintage Robert Sheckley or Philip K. Dick in his speediest vein.

In *Software,* the boppers (robots) achieved self-awareness, freed themselves from domination by both humans and the big boppers (mainframes running many robot bodies), became self-replicating, set up their city of Disky on the Moon, lost it to the humans, and retreated to the Nest under the surface.

In *Wetware,* the boppers attempt to create "meatbops," protoplasmic humans with bopper software, in order to conquer the Earth and merge the two species. A bopper named Berenice uses a meatie to plant a meatbop embryo in Delia Taze while she is puddled in Merge, which causes her to flee the Moon to her parents' home in Louisville, where Manchile is born and starts a new religion. Meanwhile, back on the Moon, private eye Stahn Mooney is hired by Taze's boss, underground drug chemist Max Yukawa, to find her, while Emul, another bopper who pines for Berenice, impregnates Darla with another meatbop embryo, and her boyfriend Whitey—

Well anyway, you get the idea, and that's just the *plot,* which is somehow the least of *Wetware.* This stuff is incredibly dense, and by dense, I don't mean stupid. Rucker piles on the plot complications and piles on the detail and piles on the invention.

The boppers implant electronic "rats" into human brains to create remote-controlled meaties. They rebuild their own bodies every ten months. They do a bopper psychedelic called dreak. Humans melt themselves down into common protoplasmic puddles with a drug called Merge. Some boppers opt for talking like the prose of Edgar Allan Poe, others for Kerouac. Della's parents in Louisville are zoned out dopers. Manchile's sole surviving offspring on Earth eats a night watchman and has his balls shot off. The boppers do a thriving business selling organs to the humans. They grow human bodies for this purpose in "pink-tanks." One of their standard genotypes is Stahn Mooney's dead wife Wendy. The flickercladding, which covers the boppers and through which they partially communicate, eventually becomes a kind of independent artificial species itself . . . etc., etc., ad infinitum.

If you think this is satire, you are wrong. Not that there aren't plenty of laughs along the way in *Wetware,* but Rucker is not playing all this stuff for laughs, not exactly, no matter what a second-hand description must sound like. The back cover blurbs proclaim "LUNATIC," "CRAZY," "BATTY," and "PARANOID," and all that's true too, but it doesn't tell the whole story.

For one thing, Rucker knows his science and technology, and he uses it. All this weird stuff is rendered with plausibility and a kind of crazed verisimilitude. *Wetware*

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doesn't have the kind of realistic feel that conventional hard science fiction does, because the events and the world described are so totally off the wall, but the science and technology are sound, and so the strange world hangs together believably. The characters are real people with complex inner lives, not cartoons. The ending is even rather moving and romantic.

Science fiction that knows it's science fiction.

Science fiction that, for one thing, abandons any attempt to cross over to a mainstream readership. If you're not familiar with science fiction, something like *Wetware* will be almost incomprehensible, and if this is going to cost Rucker potential audience, what he gains in return is the freedom to use the full palette of the science fictional possible.

Science fiction that, for another thing, is neither satirical nor realistic in a conventional sense, nor quite surrealistic either. Science fiction that exists on its own unique level of reality, namely that of a contract with the readers that states that if the writer can convince them that what is going on is scientifically *possible,* the readers will grant the writer the license to commit the utterly outrageous.

Is this what Rudy Rucker means by "free form"?

Is this why he too is proclaiming his defection from Cyberpunk?

If so, it says something rather peculiar about the Movement of which Rucker was so recently a core member, since he's been writing like this all along, since *Software,* which supposedly *was* hardcore Cyberpunk, is indistinguishable from *Wetware* stylistically, and since both novels are cyber to the max and punk as all hell in terms of the sex and drug habits of their sympathetic protagonists.

Does this mean that Cyberpunk never existed *except* as "The Movement," which is to say as a small circle of personal friends and literary associates? Yes and no. Rucker, for example, certainly fits the Cyberpunk mode in terms of *content* in *Software* and *Wetware,* but it is also true that stylistically and in terms of reality-level, he's been writing "free form" all along.

True, too, that this "free form" mode from a certain perspective is nothing new at all, but rather a return to a certain main vein of traditional science fiction, the sort of science fiction that has *always* known it is science fiction—science fiction in the mode of writers as diverse as Kuttner and Kendall Foster Crossen, Sheckley and Fritz Leiber, Jack Vance and Barrington Bailey, William Burroughs and Edgar Rice Burroughs, Philip K. Dick and William Tenn—science fiction which exists *only* as science fiction, which plays entirely by its own inner rules, which accepts and utilizes all the genre conventions for its own literary purposes, and which therefore is arguably the traditional core of SF itself.

Can it be that in a certain sense Cyberpunk and "The Movement"

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were basically a renovation of this traditional genre core, a return to and a re-examination of roots from a 1980s perspective?

You could certainly make a case for it, and not with Rudy Rucker as the only example, for John Shirley, of all people, has unexpectedly turned out a primo example of the renovated good old stuff in *A Splendid Chaos*.

This is certainly unlike anything Shirley has done before and light-years away in more ways than one from anything that might be called Cyberpunk.

Contemporary humans are kidnaped by alien machineries and find themselves transported to a planet they dub Fool's Hope out in god-knows-where. Fool's Hope is a set-up world of some kind. The offstage aliens that the people there call the Meta have cobbled together many disparate landscapes, stocked them with bizarre, deadly, noxious, vile, and occasionally benign flora and fauna from all over the galaxy, and then dumped many species of sapients from other worlds there to interact one way or another, perhaps for their perverted amusement, as we might put together a tropical fish tank full of prey and predators or drop fifteen mutually hostile species of insect into the same ant farm.

To make matters more interesting, the Meta have staked out Progress Stations around the planet, where their experimental subjects can pick up useful technology, provided they survive both the sadistically hostile landscape and the depredations of competing species.

And to stir things up further, there is the Current, a vortex of energy moving randomly around the planet that mutates any being caught in it into a Twist.

The major portion of the novel is the tale of a rare interspecies expedition across the planet to a Progress Station, a picaresque odyssey and vision quest by an interstellar cast in the grand old tradition.

This too is "science fiction that knows it's science fiction," but it's not quite "free form." Like Rudy Rucker, John Shirley is having fun here, and like Rucker, he is endlessly inventive. But he is operating on a somewhat different reality level.

Shirley creates dozens of sentient alien species in *A Splendid Chaos*, not to mention bizarre plants and animals and twisted landscapes. Some of this is frightening, some of it is disgusting, some of it is wondrous, and yes, some of it is funny, but there is a certain seriousness of extrapolative rigor here up to a point. On one level it's hard for the reader to take so many weird aliens seriously, but Shirley is telling a serious multiplex story, he takes his characters quite seriously, including the main aliens, and so the reader is more than willing to take it all seriously, too.

Which is arguably the central esthetic effect of traditional hard core SF when it is done as well as *A Splendid Chaos*.

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What does this have to do with Cyberpunk or The Movement?

The instant response is "absolutely nothing."

However . . .

One of the things that makes *A Splendid Chaos* work so well, that enables Shirley to maintain his fine balance between baroque inventiveness and serious emotional reader involvement, is the very area in which the novel departs from the traditional good old hard core stuff—choice of viewpoint characters.

In place of the traditional spacemen, explorers, scientists, or heroic adventurers through whose viewpoints we usually experience this sort of story, Shirley drops a thoroughly contemporary cast of humans on Fool's Hope. His main protagonists were rockers suckered into a Meta trap on a New York street that had disguised itself as a punk disco. Zero, the young main viewpoint character, was one of them, studying to be a film-maker when he was snatched. By giving us traditional hard core SF through a quite untraditional set of realistically rendered human characters, Shirley renovates the old mode and makes it something new and personal.

Which, in the final analysis, may be exactly what Cyberpunk may end up doing for science fiction. What in some ways started out as a literary movement that seemed grounded in new theory and content may in some respects prove to have been retro, a re-examination of science fiction's roots and traditional material from an altered 1980s perspective.

From which its main adherents would now seem to be not so much retreating as rediversifying their work, enriched and enhanced from what they have learned in the process.

Indeed, if there was a Cyberpunk Movement, one of its strong points would seem to be that its core practitioners, in one way or another, have all known when it is time to move on; none of them would seem to have been trapped by their own ideology.

Bruce Sterling, as everyone who cares about such things knows, is or was the main Cyberpunk ideologist, and the pseudonymous editor of *Cheap Truth*. But with the possible exception of *The Artificial Kid*, which he wrote long before there was any such thing as a Cyberpunk Movement, none of his own novels has been anything like a fictional expression of the theories promulgated in the introductions in his anthology, *Mirrorshades*, or laid out in earlier interviews.

Even the main Cyberpunk ideologist has never had his fiction trapped by ideology, and that is surely a good thing. And, indeed, in *Islands in the Net*, Sterling seems to be taking a revisionist look at certain instantly traditional Movement assumptions.

A word of warning about *Islands in the Net*. This novel starts very slowly. There were times in the

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first sixty pages or so when the only thing that kept me reading was a certain trust in Sterling as an interesting writer. The book would have been greatly improved if the first seventy pages had been ruthlessly blue-penciled or if some action from later on had been brought up front and much of the long set-up handled in flashback. But don't give up on it. It takes a long time to get going, but once it does, *Islands in the Net* rewards the patient reader.

The "Net" or the "Matrix" or "Cyberspace," or whatever one chooses to call it, is of course the central Movement McGuffin—the electronic network of data banks, communications, TV coverage, fund movement, and so forth, that already links together our present global village and will do so even more strongly and centrally in the future.

And it has its economic and political consequences, as we see in Gibson's trilogy and the first two books of John Shirley's "Eclipse" trilogy, and perhaps most cogently in *Islands in the Net*. Transnational corporations become dominant over geographically circumscribed national governments. Data becomes the major item of world commerce and data theft or embezzlement big time crime. National loyalties attenuate as world culture becomes globalized and homogenized. There is a certain Cyberpunk consensus future centered around the Net—a transnationalized, high tech, economically data-based, electronic global village, in which even street punks are plugged in.

However . . .

There is a very short Ray Bradbury story in which the U.S. is under nuclear attack and Americans are dashing back home from Mexico. Two Mexican gas station attendants ask their gringo customers what is going on.

"Haven't you heard?" they are told. "They've bombed the U.S. It's the end of the world!" And up the road north the Americans motor.

One Mexican looks perplexedly at the other.

"What do they mean, *the world?*"

And that, in a certain sense, is what *Islands in the Net* is about. Some of the islands in question are actual geographical isles—Grenada, Singapore—but others are geopolitical islands like drought-stricken and starving central Africa, and what they all have in common is that they are Third World islands enmeshed and struggling in the First World Net.

Sterling is after something very important indeed here, something which Cyberpunk, and indeed science fiction in general, has largely and conveniently thusfar ignored, namely that the Net, or the Matrix or Cyberspace, the electronically interconnected global village, the emerging transnational data net and information economy, the brave new post-national world with everyone electronically plugged into everyone and everything else, is

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almost certainly going to be a First World show.

The culture and economy of the Net certainly encircles and *dominates* the world, but it is not the *whole* world. Chez Sterling, it has made most war obsolete, eliminated nuclear weapons, created a corporate transnational economy, and improved standard of living and lifestyle for all the twenty-first century cyberyuppies plugged into it with their ubiquitous portable terminals.

But there are islands caught struggling in the Net that are *not* plugged into it and don't want to be—small ones like Singapore and Grenada, huge ones like the great middle mass of starving Africa – Third World islands. Some of these, like central Africa, are simply being left to stew in their own juices as not worth the Net's attention, others, like Grenada and Singapore, fighting to retain some kind of freedom outside the Net as data havens and data pirates.

Islands in the Net is mainly the story of the struggles between various of these "islands" and the instrumentalities of the Net itself, as seen mainly through the adventures and misadventures and geopolitical education of Laura Webster.

Laura and her husband David work for, or rather are members of, Rizome Industries Group, one of the great transnational corporations that collectively dominate the world through the Net. Working for Rizome is more than a career; it is something very much like a corporate nationality. Rizome, wherever its operations are located throughout the world, has its own corporate culture, and a rather idealistic and utopian one it is, too, one that is quite sympathetic, one to which Laura remains more or less loyal throughout the novel.

It is the setting up of this corporate quasi-utopia which slows down the opening of the novel, and things don't really start moving until Laura and David, who have been running a Rizome Lodge in Galveston, get sent on a diplomatic-cum-espionage mission to Grenada after an important Grenadian is killed by unknown forces while attending a clandestine meeting on their premises.

Once they get to Grenada, things get interesting, and not just plotwise, for this outlaw data haven island is *another* sympathetic quasi-utopia, albeit of an entirely different and rather low-budget sort. Laura, David, and the reader cannot help but empathize with its citizens and feel shock and outrage when Grenada is attacked by forces which may be proxies of the Net or may be those of Mali or may be those of Singapore, another data haven island and a somewhat nastier but still not entirely unsympathetic utopia.

Well, after this, Laura is sent to Singapore, and the plot recomplicates and thickens, and takes her and us via naval assault, shipwreck, nuclear terrorist submarine, war, prison, and revolution to

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the hideous depths of starving Africa, where, despite the grim circumstances, yet another sort of raw utopian tribal society persists, led by a kind of latter-day Lawrence of Arabia.

It would be pointless, nearly impossible, and counterproductive to detail the complicated storyline further. There is action, horror, loss, growth, but no pat resolutions, just as Sterling eschews black and white morality or simplistic geopolitics here. The culture of the Net is not villainous, nor, really, are the data havens, though the situation pits them against each other. Central Africa would have been a mess with or without the transnational corporations and the Net, yet it is a mess not entirely without hope or human dignity.

To the extent that *Islands in the Net* is a "Cyberpunk" novel, and in a certain weird way it is, what Sterling is doing here is taking the consensus "Movement" future and looking at its world from an entirely new perspective. Where previous Movement fiction has viewed this world from the perspective of the people plugged into the Net, here Sterling looks at it from the viewpoints of the "islanders" who are caught in it but are not of it.

And by doing it through the odyssey of a "First World mainlander" into the peripheral archipelago, he makes Laura Webster's journey something of a paradigm for a literary journey that "Cyberpunk" and science fiction itself would benefit from taking.

It goes without saying that science fiction has always been dominantly a First World literature. One might say that this is simply because it is written in a First World language, but English is the first or second language of much of the Third World from Africa to India to the Caribbean. There are quite a few Third World writers writing in it, but, it would seem, little or no SF from a Third World point of view.

Why this is so would have to be the subject of a whole other essay, longer and more problematical than this one, but what Bruce Sterling reminds us of in *Islands in the Net* is that SF has ignored the Third World at least as much as the Third World has ignored SF.

Almost all of our tales of the future are set in some society at that future's cutting edge. There has been very little indeed from the point of view of the peoples caught in the Net, caught at the economic and political periphery, caught in the future of the City on the Hill, caught against their will in a spear-carrier role.

What do you mean, the future?

Whose future?

Why, of course, *ours!*

But what future are we making for the peoples of the Third World? And what might they have to say about it? Political consciousness and morality aside, there are certainly plenty of good stories to be found on the future interface between First and Third Worlds.

With the possible exception of

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space advocacy hard SF, no vein of SF could fairly be said to be more focused on the technological cutting edge, more modishly mod, more hiply urban, more relentlessly First World, than Cyberpunk! How interesting indeed that one of the few SF novels to explore these archipelagic waters should be written by the ideological guru of such a Movement re-examining its consensus reality from a revisionary viewpoint.

Even more interesting, perhaps, is that roughly at the same time, Lewis Shiner, whose first novel *Frontera* was as First World and high tech as you could get, must have been writing *Deserted Cities of the Heart,* another novel by a core "Movement" writer set right along the Third World-First World interface. Interesting too that Shiner and Sterling both live in Austin. It would seem to be not very presumptuous to suppose that they may have discussed these matters with each other.

But if you think two literary buddies writing thematically similar novels in the same town at roughly the same time would end up producing similar novels, you couldn't be more wrong.

Deserted Cities of the Heart isn't even science fiction, except by the wildest stretch of the desperate packager's imagination.

Geographically, the setting is Mexico, and mostly far from major cities. Temporally, we shall see, this is sort of the immediate past for the most part, but elusively so.

The Iran-Contra revelation and the Mexico City earthquake date this as 1986, but the revolution going on in Shiner's Mexico didn't end up happening in the real 1986, or at least on nothing like this scale. Maybe Shiner was writing this earlier and guessed wrong about how political events in Mexico would go. Or maybe the subtly altered world effect is deliberate, for *Deserted Cities of the Heart* is a time travel novel of a kind, of a very subjective kind, and, in the mode of the Latin American magic realists, Shiner may be mythologizing recent history to illumine its inner meaning.

We see the events through the viewpoints of Carmichael, a reporter for *Rolling Stone;* Thomas, an anthropologist working for a soft tech ecotopian project closed down by the locals; his brother Eddie, a rock musician who has joined a Mayan tribe; and Lindsay, Eddie's wife, come to Mexico to save him, and for whom Thomas has long had an unrequited lust.

Yes indeed, this may be Mexico, it may be a politically passionate story of a Mexican revolution against American domination, and it may involve a mystical quest via psychedelic mushroom into Mexico's Mayan roots, but the viewpoint characters are all Americans, and they bring America with them inside their heads.

But think about it before you accuse Lewis Shiner of being chickenhearted or chauvinistic. Think of how presumptuous it would look

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in certain quarters for a First World writer to tell *any* story through the viewpoint of Third World sensibilities. Think of how well you'd have to do it to avoid making an unseemly spectacle of yourself. It's one thing to say that a science fiction writer who can get behind the eyes of an alien from Antares should be able to get inside an alien from the Third World, but you do a little more looking over your shoulder when the aliens in question are actually around to tell you you got it all wrong.

Be all that as it may, the novel that Shiner *did* write is entirely successful in and of itself, and while they may not be viewpoint characters, the important Mexican characters—Carla and Faustino the revolutionaries, Espinosa the military officer, Oscar the helicopter pilot, Chan Ma'ax the brujo—are all believable, well-rounded, noncliched real people with inner lives and the reader's sympathy.

So, too, does Shiner imbue the reader with sympathy for Mexico with power and with skill and with what would seem to be genuine political passion. America is the heavy here, in the form of the "Fighting 666th," a mercenary outfit modeled on a cross between the Contras, the CIA, and the Singlaub operation, which is to say that if Shiner was guessing on the course of future events in Central America in 1986, he wasn't off by much. If Oliver North didn't really invent the 666th, he would have felt right at home in command.

But *Deserted Cities of the Heart* is by no means a didactic political screed. It is a love triangle of a peculiarly incestuous sort, though by the time Thomas and Lindsay reach Eddie in an abandoned Mayan city, he is already more deeply involved in his mushroom-born vision quest into his own and the Mayan past than in here and her and now.

Science fiction?

Well, one could stretch things to the limit and say that this is a sort of alternate world novel.

Fantasy?

Certainly, of a kind. Unless you happen to believe that psychedelic mushrooms can project your consciousness into your own past or into the deep past inside another person, not in a hallucination, or even a dreamtime walkabout, but into the actual historical past, in control of actual events even while a future self is lucidly dreaming it all up the timeline.

Magic realism?

Maybe, of a peculiar North American sort, despite the Latin American setting and the Mayan dreamtime. For in a certain respect, Shiner is still showing himself to be a science fiction writer here even if *Deserted Cities of the Heart* isn't science fiction. The descriptive strategy is entirely realistic even when the events are not, a traditional stricture of both science fiction and North American fantasy quite alien to the free form surrealism of Latin American magic realism.

Cyberpunk?

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You've got to be kidding.

One might say that Lewis Shiner was somewhat the junior member of the Movement Gang of Five; *Deserted Cities of the Heart* is only his second novel. Shirley, Rucker, and Sterling had been publishing quite a bit longer and had published more, and Gibson, of course, had written a truly groundbreaking novel which had made him a major reputation.

But *Deserted Cities of the Heart* is surely as good as any novel that any of the writers who would now seem to be graduating from the "Movement" have written since *Neuromancer,* and arguably the best of them.

Of course such competitive rankings are invidious and counterproductive and so, on first glance, is the notion of a few literary buddies getting together and declaring themselves a Movement.

Or is it?

If you look at the fine and interesting and quite diverse work that has come out the other side somehow, you have to wonder. If these guys were a literary cabal or even just a self-promotion society, you've got to admit that they've backed up their bullshit with good solid work.

Nor, with the possible temporary exception of Gibson, who could hardly have been expected to ignore the overwhelmingly juicy commercial temptation to do so, have they bullshitted themselves into feeling they must continue to practice what they once preached.

These have been five amazingly diverse novels, considering that a couple of years ago or less, their authors were all comrades in a self-proclaimed literary movement.

But then the New Wave was in certain respects a self-conscious literary movement, too, and though the nature of its theoretical underpinnings had little to do with any common content, there was a kind of political consensus. And we also all went to the same parties.

Literature in general seems to need "Movements" from time to time. Writing, after all, is the ultimate solitary solipsistic occupation, and maybe it's not such a terrible thing if writers of like spirit gather together from time to time to get loaded, restore a sense of collective effort to the literary enterprise, issue manifestoes, water the tree of liberty with the blood of assholes, learn from each other, and then go home to their own personal visions.

Maybe science fiction in particular needs such Movements in a slightly more desperate way—in order to remind ourselves that while we may be doing this for a living and partying at conventions and making high five figure deals, there should be more to what we are doing than negotiating the next contract or writing something to fulfill the last.

Movements like the New Wave and Cyberpunk at the very least are about passionate concern with something beyond money and awards and movie deals. Love them or hate them, agree with their

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viewpoints or despise them, at least they are about *the work itself,* about what it has and hasn't been and what it might or should be.

We certainly need to refocus on that from time to time. We certainly need to learn new techniques and forms, to consider unexplored areas, to renew, if you will, our *real* sense of wonder, to remember why the hell we started writing this stuff in the first place.

The New Wave came and went, and now it may well be that Cyberpunk has come and gone—the "Movement" has at least proclaimed its own death—and what the two left beyond was both similar and different.

The New Wave left a science fiction whose action-adventure straightjacketing, asexuality, formal conservatism, and relentlessly transparent prose had been shattered as literary limits. You could still write such stuff, and most people still do, but you no longer *had* to. This opened up the whole wide literary world for science fictional possibility.

The Cyberpunk Movement, in the end, at least to judge from these five novels, may have accomplished the converse, at least for these writers—opened up the body of traditional science fiction material for exploration by writers of real literary concerns by illuminating it through a variety of flipside viewpoints.

Mercifully, it would seem that neither the New Wave nor the Movement survived long enough to ossify into a new orthodoxy, nor did their skillful riders stay in the curl too long.

Like all good Waves and Movements, they arose, and built, and crested, and took their shockwave surfers to places they hadn't been before.

But like all good shockwave riders, they knew when to get off. Which is certainly before the wave of the future that you are riding breaks against the shore. ●

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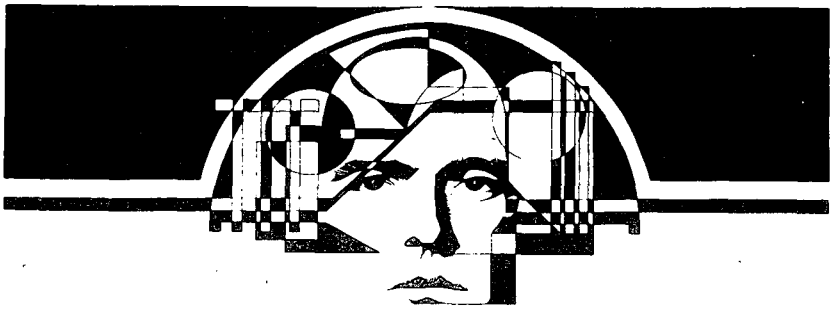

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SF CONVENTIONAL CALENDAR

by Erwin S. Strauss

I'm just back from WorldCon 1988 in New Orleans, with news of the 1991 con in Chicago, and cons this winter. Plan now for social weekends with your favorite SF authors, editors, artists, and fellow fans. For a longer, later list, an explanation of cons, and a sample of SF folksongs, send me an SASE (addressed, stamped #10 [business] envelope) at Box 3343, Fairfax VA 22038. The hot line is (703) 823-3117. If a machine answers, leave your area code & number. I'll call back on my nickel. Early evening's usually a good time to call cons (most are home phones). When writing cons, enclose an SASE. Look for me at cons as Filthy Pierre.

JANUARY, 1989

27-29—**Boskone.** For info, write: **NESFA, Box G, MIT PO, Cambridge MA 02139.** Or call: **(617) 625-2311** (10 am to 10 pm, not collect). Con will be held in: Springfield MA (if city omitted, same as in address). Guests will include: Tim Powers, James Gurney. At the Marriott and Sheraton Tara hotels.

FEBRUARY, 1989

1-4—**Life, the Universe & Everything.** BYU campus, Provo UT. Serious side of written & media SF.

3-5—**CzarKon. (314) 725-6448.** Stratford House, Fenton MO (near St. Louis). No under-18s admitted.

3-5—**SFeraCon, % SFera, Ivanicgradska 41 A, Zagreb 41000, Yugoslavia.** Long-time East-bloc con.

3-5—**All-Union Con, % Boris Zovgordny, CPO Poste Restante, Volgograd 66, USSR.** Komsomolsk, USSR.

3-5—**ConFabulation.** Brown County Nashville Indiana. The Coulsons, E. Vartanoff, R. Woodring.

10-12—**ConTinuity.** Holiday Inn Medical Center, Birmingham AL. Offutt, Chafee, Coger, B. Bryer.

17-19—**WisCon. (608) 251-6226.** Holiday Inn SE, Madison WI. Pat Cadigan, & some guy named Dozois.

17-19—**Circle Ouroboros.** Howard Johnson's, Meridian MS. Lackey. Themes: Heinlein & time travel.

17-20—**SerCon, Box 1332, Dayton OH 45401. (513) 236-0728.** SERious & CONstructive talk about SF.

24-26—**ConTemplation, Box 7242, Columbia MO 65205. (314) 442-8135.** M. Lackey, D. L. Anderson.

24-26—**MicroCon, % Richmond Hunt, 51 Danes Rd., Exeter, Devon. EX4 4LS, UK.** On-campus con.

24-26—**Future Science, % SEDS-FS/1, Box 979, University Station, Lexington KY 40506.**

MARCH, 1989

3-5—**CaveCon, Box 24, Franklin KY 42134. (502) 586-3366.** At Park Mammoth Resort, Park City KY.

AUGUST, 1989

31-Sept. 4—**Noreascon 3, Box 46, MIT PO, Cambridge MA 02139.** WorldCon in Boston. $70 to 3/15/89.

AUGUST, 1990

23-27—**ConFiction, % Box 1252, BGS, New York NY 10274.** Hague, Holland. WorldCon. $60 to 12/1/88.

30-Sept. 3—**ConDiego, Box 15771, San Diego CA 92115.** North American SF Con. $55 until mid-1989.

AUGUST, 1991

29-Sept. 2—**ChiCon V, Box A3120, Chicago IL 60690.** WorldCon. Author Hal Clement, artist Richard Powers, editor Martin Harry Greenberg, fans Jon & Joni Stopa, toastmaster Marta Randall. To join, send $75 (in 1989) to Box 218121, Upper Arlington OH 43221 (Chicago address is to get info only).

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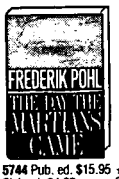

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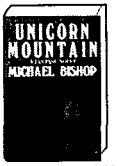

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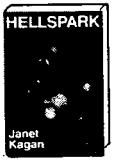

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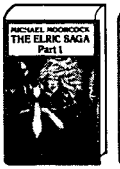

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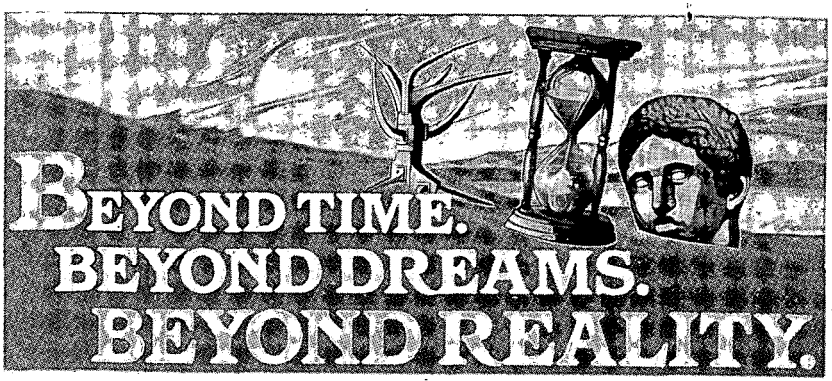

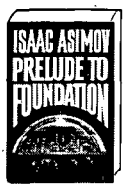

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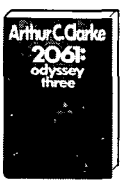

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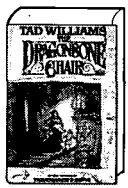

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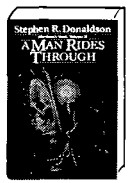

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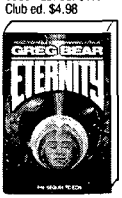

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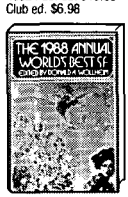

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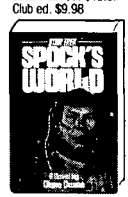

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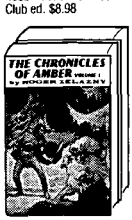

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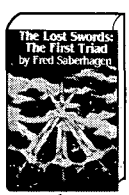

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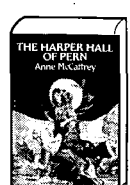

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